

IX.

Artes Liberales

An Association for the Furtherance of Liberal Education
and Democratic Values in Post-communist Societies

Artes Liberales was founded in Prague in January 1997 as a cooperative endeavour of educational leaders from Central Europe, the Baltic States, and Ukraine. As a regional educational association, Artes Liberales sponsors regular professional exchanges and other collaborative programs to promote liberal education and democratic leadership among scholars and institutions of higher learning in post-communist countries. Artes Liberales encourages colleges and universities to adopt innovative liberal arts curricula as a counter-weight to the premature and often excessive specialization typical of communist and post-communist pedagogy. Artes Liberales is actively engaged in expanding cooperative ties with other liberal arts institutions, both in the region and in the United States.

Members of the Artes Liberales steering committee: Samuel Abrahám, Director, Society for Higher Learning, Bratislava; Jerzy Axer, Director, Centre for Studies in the Classical Tradition, Warsaw; Agnes Erdélyi, Eotvos University, Budapest; Serhiv Ivaniouk, Rector, University of Kiev-Mohyla Academy, Kiev; Peteris Lakis, Rector, Latvian Academy of Culture, Riga; Anatoly Mikhailov, Rector, European Humanities University, Minsk; Anca Oroveanu, Scientific Director, New European College, Bucharest; Rein Raud, Rector, Estonian Humanities Institute, Tallinn; Jan Sokol, former Minister of Education, Czech Republic, Deputy Director, Institute of Fundamental Learning, Prague; and Julia Stefanova, Executive Director, Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange, Sofia; Stasys Vaitekunas, Rector, Klaipeda University, Lithuania.

US Representative: Nicholas Farnham, Director of Educational Programs at The Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, will act as the Foundation's program liaison with Artes Liberales. His New York office will serve temporarily as the organization's secretariat.

The Educational Leadership Program of The Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation
1060 Park Avenue, Suite 1C, New York, New York 10128-10128
Fax: +1 (212) 410-2611, E-mail: elp@usa.net
www.edlead.org

CONTENTS

NIKOLAI KOPOSOV **"What is Liberal Education?"**

Presented at the *Artes Liberales* conference: "The Challenge of Liberal Education in the 21st Century"
Warsaw, October 19-22, 2000

The Artes Liberales supplement is published thanks to a kind contribution of the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, New York.

WHAT IS LIBERAL EDUCATION?

NIKOLAI KOPOSOV

My presentation is partly informational, and partly analytical. My first task is to give a general description as well as to review some elements of the historical background useful for understanding of the present state of liberal education and of the contemporary debates around it. I'm trying to give as impartial an account of liberal education as is possible for someone who believes it to be an indispensable part of the contemporary University and who is personally involved in introducing it in one of the East European countries. My second task, as I see it, is to provoke discussion. The way I have chosen to do this is to sketch a typology of liberal arts institutions and discourses and to suggest that liberal education is such a complex and contradictory phenomenon that perhaps there is little sense to praise or to blame it as a whole.

Preliminary logical remarks Since the title of my paper calls for a definition, it would be misleading to avoid discussing what logical form such a definition could have. I argue that social terms do not usually satisfy requirements of the Aristotelean logic but rather function as imperfect general names that refer to a number of concrete experiences that should not necessarily satisfy any necessary and sufficient condition of the category of membership. However, a kind of essentialist ambition seems inherent in the terms we use. This ambition, manifesting itself in changing - and often mutually exclusive - definitions of a given term, is perhaps the only *raison d'être* of the corresponding social phenomenon, which otherwise would appear as a set of social practices having little to do with each other. So my presentation, instead of giving a formal definition of liberal education, tries to describe (1) multiple practices to which the term "liberal education" refers and (2) different strategies of legitimization which in fact are interpretations of the term's meaning.

Historical introduction

The historical introduction starts with the early history of the modern University. I try to show that the modernization of the University curriculum in the XVIIIth century produced a system relatively close to what we understand now as liberal arts. The major intellectual movement which influenced this system was neo-humanism. Its basic idea, as it relates to our topic, was that education (*Bildung*) was a means of developing human per-

sonality. But it was a rather short moment in University history, so that in the second quarter of the XIXth century a new development started which was linked essentially to the professionalization of intellectual work. This tendency, considerably strengthened by the rapid growth of the Universities in the late XIXth century, had an important ideological counterpart, namely, the conception according to which Universities were essentially centers of knowledge production. The Humboldtian University is usually said to be based on a combination of teaching and research. In fact it was research, not teaching which served as a basis for the whole system of the University's rites de passage. A natural consequence of this was the transformation of the University into a relatively closed structure whose main goal was self-reproduction, the interests of the corporation being naturally presented as a means of attaining public welfare - if not as public welfare per se. The social conditions of the mid-nineteenth century, when this system came into being, were favorable for such a development, given that massive production of a highly trained technical staff for industry was still quite marginal for the overall University activity. The most immediate practical task the University had to deal with was to train civil servants and - perhaps even more important - to create a kind of secular priesthood, a corporation that included schoolteachers and, which, headed by the University professors themselves, had to replace traditional religious institutions. In this context it was quite natural that the idea of science served as legitimization of the new cast of secular priests. The professionalization of intellectual work and the formation of the modern University which first started in Germany and then in France, was for different reasons belated in England, where consequently more elements of the medieval and Renaissance University system survived and where until the beginning of the XXth century, if not later, the ideal of the "intellectual gentleman" seemed to the University professors at least as appealing as that of the professional research worker. Belated professionalization of the Academy was also characteristic of the United States whose educational system was considerably influenced by the British one. Still it was essentially in the United States that by the turn of the century the University started to orient itself more and more towards the pragmatic needs of rapidly growing industry. It was here that the model of the "University factory" (*Grossbetrieb der Universitaet*) first appeared, to be later exported to Europe, whose first reaction

was to blame the model for its betrayal of the humanistic traditions of the Humboldtian University. Still by the middle of the XXth century the "University factory" succeeded to conquer Europe, so that it was precisely this model that was reproduced so many times on both sides of the Atlantic in the period of the University's most impressive growth, namely, during the "thirty splendid years" (*trente glorieuses*) after the Second World War. But it is also to be stressed that in the context of the post-war "scientific revolution" the research function of the University was strengthened, so that the logic of caste reproduction was complemented, not suppressed, by that of technical training.

The two University revolutions of the last two centuries - the formation of the "research University" and that of the "University factory" - left relatively few elements of the neo-humanistic tradition untouched. But still it must be kept in mind that University has history, and not essence. In other words, what we call the modern University is a product of such a long development (I was able here to trace only some of its stages) that now it would perhaps be more accurate to describe it not in terms of a single project, but as an internally contradictory structure whose different elements go back to very different epochs and sets of circumstances.

Part I.

Liberal Education in the United States It is against this background that I try to characterize liberal arts education, first in the United States and then in Eastern Europe. The first question to be asked here is what is the place of liberal education within such a complex and contradictory structure? First of all, one of the meanings of the term, going back to the medieval concept of *artes liberales*, refers to the idea of unified knowledge, no less fundamental for the medieval *scientia* than for XIXth-century science (in fact, the latter borrowed the ideal from the former). That is why liberal education is sometimes considered the essence of the University whose very name seems to refer to the idea of unified knowledge. If we follow this logic, may we say that liberal education is what is being taught in the Universities? I'm not sure many of us will subscribe to this thesis. To the contrary, what many people have in mind when talking about liberal education, are liberal arts colleges that are often opposed to - rather than identified with - the Universities. In this sense, liberal education can be said to be something that is being taught in the lib-

eral arts colleges. This thesis, stated explicitly, would hardly look more acceptable for us than the previous one. So where is liberal education located?

Perhaps the easiest way to approach this problem is to look at how the term is actually used. First of all, it is an almost exclusively English term. In French and German it does not exist, and many of the Eastern Europeans know by their own experience how difficult it is to translate it into their languages. What was said earlier about the belated development of the research Universities in England and the United States and about the persistence of the medieval traditions in British universities could perhaps explain these linguistic differences. Second, in the English speaking world the term is used both in connection with liberal arts colleges and general University education, with special reference to such disciplines as history, languages, literature, etc. In this latter sense arts are more or less synonymous with humanities (and clearly linked to the Renaissance concept of *studia humanitatis*). Perhaps instead of taking extreme positions and identifying liberal education either with University education in general or, more specifically, with the education taught in the liberal arts colleges it would be more accurate to say that there are two different meanings of this term. As we shall see, these two meanings more or less correspond to the actual variety of institutions usually characterized as giving a liberal education.

All in all there are over 800 hundred of such institutions in the United States. Usually they are relatively small (from several hundred up to several thousand students). Some of them are independent, others form a part of bigger Universities. The place of a liberal arts college within a University may be different. In some Universities these colleges exist alongside prestigious schools and departments that give highly specialized education in different disciplines. Actually it would be accurate to say that almost all universities, public and private, great research institutions and minor state institutions alike give at least lip-service to offering liberal arts programs as part of their undergraduate (non-professional) program. These programs superficially look quite a bit like what is offered in non-denominational and church-related and independent private and public liberal arts colleges. Some universities have colleges within them, Yale, Harvard and Columbia, Tulane for instance. But this simply serves today as an administrative separation for the undergraduate program.

Although some colleges were founded as teacher training institutions, today liberal arts colleges are far from being pedagogical schools and most of their graduates get far more prestigious jobs in business or in public service.

Now how can liberal education be described in terms of content? Here again no standard version of liberal arts curriculum exists. Its core is often formed by the humanities, especially in the most traditional colleges, but social sciences are also very much present. In some (not very many) colleges studio arts play an important role in the curriculum. There are wide variations in the curriculum that fall along several different poles. These are: 1. Distribution requirements (e.g. Harvard University) versus no distribution requirement (e.g. Brown University). A distribution requirement means that a student must take a specified number of courses in each category of humanities, social sciences, and sciences. This is a way of giving the student some freedom of choice while also ensuring some balance. If we look at the definition of liberal education that was in the statement, that was the outcome of the 1996 Budapest meeting of Artes Liberales, distributional balance was noted in the definition: "Liberal Education can be described as education that fosters a development of intellectual curiosity, critical intelligence, judgment, imagination, and sympathy for the varieties of the human condition. It seeks to place students in the stream of history, to acquaint them with the methods of science, and to expose them to the power of the arts..." 2. Core courses versus no core courses. Some colleges, particularly the church related ones have historically had one or two courses that every student had to take, in order that there be a universal grounding. These courses might be compared with the Marxist philosophy courses that had to be taken in the Soviet system. Today the core curriculum is often composed of interdisciplinary team taught courses. There is considerable variety here as each college's faculty has hammered out its own version. In almost no case do core courses dominate the curriculum, however. 3. Major versus no majors. While most colleges require majors at the present time, there are a few that do not. Some research universities give their students more freedom of choice than some liberal arts colleges. On the other hand, there are a number of innovative colleges where elective disciplines dominate a curriculum structured not so much around academic disciplines as around interdisciplinary programs. So there is no necessary and sufficient condition a curriculum has to satisfy



in order to be called liberal. Perhaps the two most distinctive features of liberal education have to do with the pedagogical technologies it uses and with the teaching staff it employs. Lectures in big halls are not typical for the liberal arts colleges, though again modern interactive methods of teaching are being used in different colleges to a different extent, and there are many professors in research universities who also lay emphasis on learning versus teaching. As to the pedagogical staff, it is usually believed to consist of those professors who prefer teaching to research. Course loads in liberal arts colleges are usually higher than in research universities. However, many professors teaching in the best liberal arts colleges publish no less extensively than their colleagues from ordinary universities (though certainly not as much as the leading professors at the best research universities).

Given such a variety of practices to which the term "liberal arts" refers to, it is normal that there are quite different discursive strategies used to praise liberal education. I would single out at least three such strategies whose elements may be used in different combinations. The first strategy is

to praise the humanistic values of general education, in other words, the values of culture as opposed to those of efficiency. Most often this is a defensive strategy. It is assumed that liberal education has run into difficulties and that most of the students and their parents consider narrow professional training to be a more sure means of employment. This strategy often identifies liberal education with the University education in general. The decline of the universities is not necessarily described in apocalyptic terms, though usually with some nostalgia. Sometimes the argument includes the question of how to adapt humanistic values to the age of efficiency. The second strategy is to praise the efficiency of liberal arts education. The arguments put forward here are usually based on the successful careers of liberal arts college graduates and on the high appreciation of liberal education by most top managers and politicians. Liberal education is said to be favorable for the development of productive thinking. It is opposed to, rather than identified with, the University education. So if there is any crisis of education, it is that of the traditional University, while liberal education is a response to it. The University factory is seen as a remnant of the industrial age, while the post-industrial society needs liberally educated people.

Opposed as they are, these two strategies have something in common, namely, the idea of fully developed human personality, which can be interpreted both as a value in itself and within the framework of the ideology of efficiency which brings us very close to the idea of adapting cultural values to the age of efficiency. Personally I'm very much in favor of this combination. The third strategy - perhaps the most important one - is to establish links between liberal education and democracy. This can be achieved in different ways. The first stresses the content of liberal education, the second its technology. One can say that studying history or philosophy is a way of cultivating critical thinking and civic values. One can also argue that graduates of liberal arts colleges are brought up not as obedient recipients of information but as active participants in their own education process, freedom of choice between elective disciplines and modern interactive methods of teaching being perceived here as a school of democracy in itself. So within the democratic framework of legitimization of the liberal arts there are also at least two rather different versions. To sum up the first part of my presentation: on the level of discourse analysis, as well as on the level of

description of practices, there seems to appear the same polar structure. I would argue that contemporary liberal education contemporary is organized around two very different poles one of which is more traditionalist, and the other more technocratic. The first pole is linked to the XVIIIth century neo-humanistic conception of Bildung. This part of the contemporary University goes back to the model which was anterior even to the model of research University, not to mention that of the University factory. The second pole can perhaps be considered a part of the contemporary response to the crisis of the University factory. I said: "a part of", because within traditional research universities there are a number of recent developments which are parallel to the modernization experienced by the innovative liberal arts colleges. These two different versions of liberal education can easily overlap both in practice and in ideology, but still not all combinations seem to be equally plausible, and some of them are quite difficult. For example, it would be strange to praise the students' autonomy in deciding upon their plans of study as a school of democracy in a college with rigid curriculum and lack of elective disciplines. So the difference between traditional and modern poles of liberal education is something quite real, and it is crucial for understanding whether there is or is not a contemporary crisis of liberal education. My answer would be that there is a crisis of traditional liberal education, while more innovative liberal arts colleges which succeeded to modernize themselves are flourishing now alongside with the best research Universities.

Part 2.

Liberal Education in Eastern Europe In this second part of my presentation I would like to comment upon the liberal arts movement in Eastern Europe which alongside the Anglo-Saxon world is emerging now as another center of liberal education. The movement started at the beginning of the 90-s and was a part of the educational reforms aiming to break away from the communist past. It was to a very considerable extent influenced by the American example, and conscious efforts of American educators to contribute to the further development of the liberal arts played a considerable role in it. Before the movement started, liberal education was hardly known in Eastern Europe at all, but to a very limited number of theorists in the field of education. But it succeeded in gaining relatively broad support within the University in most of the post-communist countries. In the last part of

my presentation I try to describe the process of acculturation of liberal education in Eastern Europe.

To understand this movement we must remember that educational reforms in the region were less of a coherent project but rather essentially an empirical attempt to adapt the University to the changing economic and social conditions of a transition to a market economy and political democracy. The introduction of the liberal arts curriculum was linked to sometimes quite different academic strategies.

Without pretending to give an exhaustive picture of the movement, I try to single out several types of liberal arts initiatives in order to make clear that there is almost as impressive a variety of emerging liberal arts institutions here as in the United States. There are at least three types of these initiatives.

First, liberal arts may appear as a basis for general University education. In a number of newly established Universities (such as the New Bulgarian University in Sofia, the American University in Bulgaria or Kiev-Moghila Academy in Ukraine and some others) they form the core of the University curriculum which is complemented by more narrow professional training. Second, there are liberal arts programs within the traditional state universities, usually the most prestigious and innovative ones (like those of Prague and Warsaw). These programs may vary from open courses to genuine liberal arts colleges inside the University (as for example Smolny College in Saint-Petersburg).

Third, there are more flexible structures (often called invisible colleges) which are usually autonomous and act on the margins of traditional educational institutions.

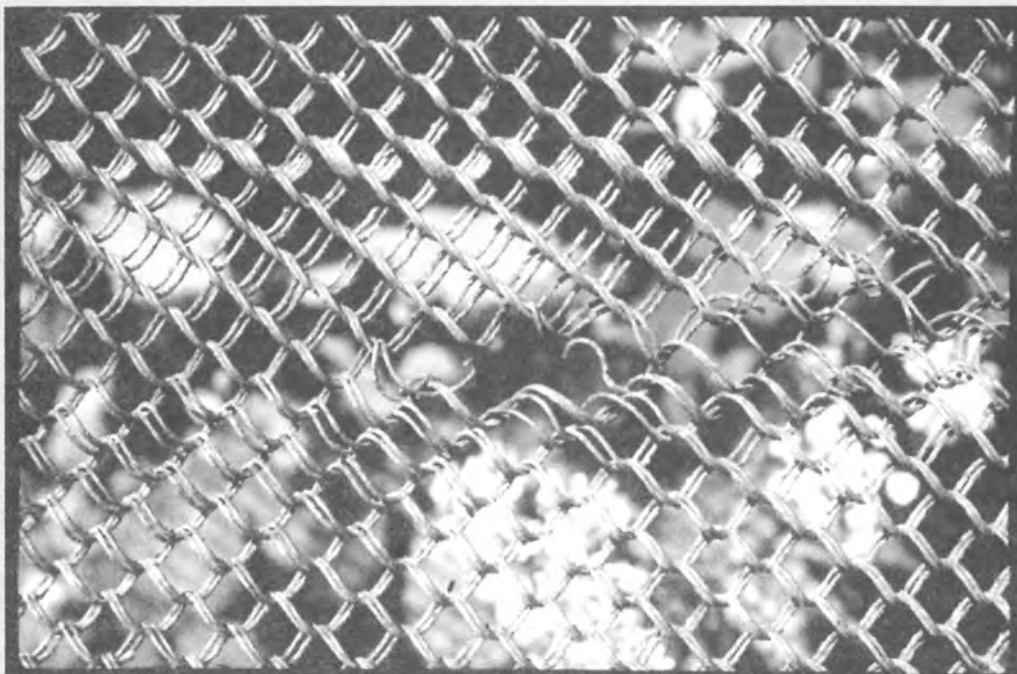
Given this variety of institutions, it is natural that there are different interpretations of what liberal arts are. It is not typical in the region to understand them just as a rigid curriculum in traditional humanities. Usually it is a more advanced version of liberal education which is being assimilated in Eastern Europe. The emphasis is on interdisciplinarity, on individual plans of study and on interactive pedagogical technologies. But it is not necessary for a program to have all these properties to be considered a program in liberal arts.

Sometimes liberal education is considered to be a part of a broader social project of modernizing the whole of the University profession. Given that it is in fact practiced mostly in those East European institutions that have strong connections with the Western Universities, it may be closely associated with the idea of international coopera-

tion and in particular with new forms of international education that aim at creating a truly multicultural educational milieu. This meaning has certainly little to do with the initial sense of the term "liberal arts", but the two things often go together, and multiculturalism is becoming one of the connotations of liberal education (as it is also the case in some innovative American colleges that consider international openness to be an important part of contemporary liberal education). Another aspect of the general educational reform which is often associated with liberal education is democratization of the University governance, and in particular participation of the faculty in the decision-making process (which is also an important element of the American academic life, if not distinctively of that of the liberal arts colleges).

There is also a tendency to use liberal arts as a model for graduate studies, which is a result of the fact that it is rather often being introduced in the best research Universities. (Hence in particular special features of the teaching staff involved in the liberal education in Eastern Europe.) Often it consists of distinguished academics for whom pedagogical issues are quite marginal if compared to the intellectual or political agenda. Liberal arts are then meant (though not necessarily explicitly said) to be an elitist intellectual project that allows for the reform of the research University and liberates it from the heritage of the University factory. This principle of student centered education, so fundamental for the American liberal arts colleges, is perhaps the most difficult principle to assimilate in Eastern Europe. However, the ideal of science in the ivory tower (or in other words, of the University's self-reproduction its major task) is usually severely criticized by proponents of liberal education. It is easy to understand why sometimes liberal arts initiatives have to face strong resistance on behalf of a considerable part of the academic establishment. Liberal education is often presented as a betrayal of the University's traditions.

Under these conditions, there is nothing strange about the fact that the liberal arts discourse in Eastern Europe is overwhelmingly dominated by a modernization agenda. However, there are some cases when an introduction of the liberal arts curriculum was presented as a return to an authentic national tradition. The clearest example is perhaps Kiev-Moghila Academy, which was an outstanding educational institution in the XVIth and XVIIIth centuries, that is to say, before the formation of the model of research University model. But even here the return to a national tradition was



seen as part of a modernization process.

The modernization discourse is very closely linked in the region to the democratization discourse. In fact, the two things often seem almost synonymous. To modernize the University means to make it educate responsible citizens for a democratic society. Consequently the emphasis is to be laid on the students' role in deciding upon their plan of study as well as on interactive pedagogical technologies. Since democracy is usually seen as the most humane political system, and communism, which democracy has to replace, as the most inhumane one, modernization and cultivation of humanistic values easily go together. Revitalizing the humanities after the period of communist domination seems to be very much in the spirit of the liberal arts. But to revitalize means also to reform. In what way? What can a new intellectual project for the humanities and social sciences look like? It is this question that has no clear answer, partly because we don't like to ask another question, namely, that of the uses of the humanities in our society, culture being considered as a value in itself. The question of what is the technological legitimacy of culture in the new society, which is quite important for the self-presentation of the modernized American liberal arts colleges, is only occasionally asked in Eastern Europe. I think that here we are faced with a major contradiction

of University reform in the region - and, in a broader sense, of democratic ideology in general. While trying to democratize our societies we don't like to question some of the basic assumptions of the democratic ideology. In particular, we forget that the legitimacy of culture in the new society can be hardly built on the same foundation as it was under the communist rule.

To sum up the second part of my presentation: though the variety of institutions where liberal education is being taught in Eastern Europe is quite impressive, it seems that the liberal arts movement is somewhat more homogeneous here than it is in the United States. Almost totally cut off from the rank and file pedagogical schools and being essentially an elitist intellectual movement, it depends upon the ideology of modernization with all its internal contradictions.

Concluding remarks

I have three groups of concluding remarks. The first has to deal with the place of liberal education in the contemporary University, the second with the relationships between humanistic and technological strategies of legitimization of the liberal arts, and the last with the future of the humanities. In this part of my presentation I would like to speak not so much as an impartial observer, but as a participant in the liberal arts movement.

1. I finished my historical introduction by saying that the University has no essence, but history. I think that history is now pushing the University to become as diverse and flexible as postindustrial society is. It is not only that in order to modernize itself the University has to integrate the most dynamic intellectual movements and advanced pedagogical technologies. The traditional department structure of the university, pretending to reflect the objective order of the Universe, can hardly stand any longer. Rather, the University is becoming a loosely connected and complexly articulated structure consisting of research, training, retraining and so on; programs reflect the chaotic multiplicity of societal demands and undergo permanent change. I can hardly imagine such a structure without a strong liberal arts program. Without it, the contemporary University would be structurally incomplete and unstable. For me personally the argument "from the structural demands" of a given whole is the most convincing type of argument. I think that today such an argument in favor of liberal arts could be legitimately put forward.

2. I think that, even trying to be impartial, I was unable to hide my sympathy for the modernized version of the liberal arts and for the technocratic strategy of their legitimization. Now I would like to stress that it seems dangerous to go

too far in this direction. In order to exist, liberal arts can't be considered just as a sum of pedagogical tools. Not all of them are necessarily used in all institutions that pretend to give liberal education, while many of them are also practiced outside these institutions. Interactive methods and course electives are certainly among the easily exportable technological means. In this connection I would like to refer to what I said at the beginning about the logical structure of social terms, namely, that essentialist ambition is usually inseparable from a reference to concrete instances and their features. I think that for the liberal arts it means that they are unthinkable outside a certain cultural tradition, namely that of European humanism. Incarnating humanistic tradition and at the same time involved in the modern search for a new place of culture in the postindustrial world, liberal education is a part of the very complex University's strategy of responding to the challenges of contemporary society.

3. If the technocratic legitimization of culture is incomplete without answering the question of what does this legitimacy imply for culture itself - or in our case for the humanities - then a new intellectual project for the humanities seems to be what liberal education needs. The existing project of what is usually called sciences de l'homme,



Kulturwissenschaften, or social sciences and humanities (I don't want to discuss here the question of terminology) goes back to the same epoch as the formation of the modern University, that is to say, to the second half of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth century. To analyze this project would need another lecture, so I would only say that, according to many observers, these disciplines are now undergoing a profound intellectual crisis. In particular, they have lost their ambition to produce objective knowledge and consequently to serve as an ideological foundation of the social order. In other words, the crisis has to do with the problem of objectivity. I would argue that to overcome the crisis, social sciences and humanities need to turn to themselves critically and to question their own intellectual conditions. The questioning can be done in different ways. One way, for example, is to study systematically how social sciences and humanities are produced and how they function in our societies, another way would be to re-examine their conceptual apparatus, and so on. My guess would be that a new paradigm could emerge out of such a turn that would abandon the objectivistic posture and accept critical thinking, not objective knowledge, as its goal and foundation.

This would be, in my mind, an accomplishment of the liberal arts. In the contemporary University they exist only as a form of education, while the University as a whole is still governed by the logic of the production of knowledge. Until a model of intellectual creativity other than that of knowledge production is accepted as equal to science, liberal arts will be a stepchild of the University. That is why re-thinking humanities seems to be crucial for the future of liberal education.

