The humanities and the social sciences

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Preliminary remark
The task set for me is different from that of most other contributors to this volume. Whereas they have been asked to write about their own particular discipline, my assignment concerns the relationships between the humanities and the social sciences at large. This is a subject of much bigger scope and far more difficult to delimit. In exploring it I have continually been puzzled by the problem of how to mark the boundaries between these two loosely defined intellectual fields. Wolf Lepenies' illuminating book on the ‘three cultures’ has persuaded me that they are best understood as forming a part of a triangular configuration to which the natural sciences belong as well. (Lepenies, 1988) As sociologists such as Karl Mannheim, Norbert Elias, and Pierre Bourdieu have demonstrated, the substantive or cognitive aspects of any such intellectual configuration cannot be separated from the historical social setting in which it has developed. In order to discuss the division of labour between the humanities and the social sciences (‘who are concerned with what?’), it has therefore been necessary also to consider questions to do with solidarity (‘who feel akin to whom, and who do

1 See especially Karl Mannheim (1927); Elias (1971); Bourdieu (1988 & 1989).
not?”), and hierarchy (“who look up to whom, who look down upon whom?”). If my paper appears to be written more than most others from an outsider’s perspective, this is partly due to the simple fact that I have not been asked to report on trends and prospects in my own field, sociology, but to discuss relationships of a more general nature. Moreover, I think that some tendency towards detachment is inherent in the sociological approach itself.

1. Introduction: the triad of ‘new faculties’

Some concepts and ideas sound so self-evident as to make any further questioning seem improper. A person who shouts ‘Long live our fatherland’ does not expect that he will be asked to explain what he means by ‘fatherland’. A similar rhetorical effect is often implied in the term ‘humanities’. It sounds as if a time-honoured tradition of ‘humanism’ is reverberating in it – a tradition of apparently unbroken continuity which extends back to the Italian Renaissance and the universities of medieval Europe and even to Greco-Roman antiquity.

On closer inspection, however, the word ‘humanities’ turns out to be neither as ancient nor as self-evident as its verbal form seems to suggest. It gained general currency in English only in the nineteenth century. And even if we include its immediate predecessors in Latin and French, the history of this small family of words is still relatively brief and far from unequivocal.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this chapter in semantic history begins with William Caxton who in 1483 distinguished two kinds of learning: the study of divinity and the study of humanity. The tenor of the distinction was obviously programmatic: it was intended to break the monopoly of theology over serious scholarship. In a similarly militant spirit Francis Bacon proposed some hundred years later that, besides divine philosophy, there should be room for natural and human philosophy – the latter being dedicated to the study of humanity.

Caxton and Bacon may have been influential writers, but the sense in which they used the word ‘humanity’ does not seem to have entered English usage. In France the term caught on better. As early as the sixteenth century at French universities, the plural form les humanités was used for a set of subjects which did not fit into the traditional curriculum dominated by theology. Translated as ‘the humanities’ this plural became general in English in the nineteenth century, mainly as the result of a movement in the United States to reform the universities and, again, to diminish the predominance of theology.

In some European languages, such as German and Dutch, the word humanities has never become accepted, whether in its Latin or vernacular forms. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, other words with a different etymology have been introduced into those languages to convey similar meanings. Thus in German the famous term Geisteswissenschaften was coined, while in Dutch first the word ‘Letters’ (a literal translation of litterae) and more recently the straight Latin humaniora came to serve as equivalents.

The developments in Dutch are interesting because they show that, even in the absence of the word ‘humanities’, there was a semantic niche becoming visible that needed to be filled. This need grew out of the expansion and internal re-arrangement of the universities in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Essentially, what happened in the Netherlands did not deviate from the general trend over most of the European continent. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the universities were composed of four faculties: Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy. In the next century and a half, Philosophy was split up into the new faculties of Letters, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences. Since then, the faculty of Letters has covered most of the area that would be known in English as ‘the humanities’.

When today we use the term humanities, its meaning is still to a large extent determined by this configuration of faculties as it has taken shape over the past two hundred years. In order to understand the present position of the humanities, it seems necessary, therefore, to see how this specific configuration developed: how the faculty of Letters related to the other two ‘new’ faculties, and how the entire group of ‘new’ faculties related to the old faculties.

These interrelationships have at least two dimensions: organizational and intellectual. The division of disciplines between faculties has been primarily an institutional arrangement; but clearly there is also an epistemological side to it. We shall have to take both aspects into account in our discussion.

For the greater part of the nineteenth century most universities on the European continent continued to be divided into four faculties. The first three of these – Theology, Law, and Medicine – were the most important, since they offered training for specific professions, whereas Philosophy was mainly taught as a general introductory subject. In the course of the century new disciplines emerged, however, which did not fit into the old departmental divisions. Physics and chemistry became too large and too independent still to be counted as branches of philosophy; and a similar growth occurred in the study of history and languages. Thanks to the ex-
pansion of secondary education, all these subjects now also offered their students the prospect of a professional career. (cf. Ringer, 1979) The first ‘new’ faculties to emerge in this process were the Natural or Physical Sciences, and Philology or ‘Letters’. Between them, these two faculties divided up most of the curriculum of Philosophy, simultaneously giving it a more empirical twist. As a third newcomer, there were the social sciences; for want of the effet civil of a teacher’s career, however, their institutional position was much weaker. (cf. den Boer, 1987: 224-284) In many cases only Economics was given the status of a separate faculty; partly as a result of this relatively early recognition (which was promoted by strong ties with the world of finance), economists to this day have continued to stay aloof from the other social sciences. When, after 1945, most European universities took over the practice already developed in the United States earlier in the century of setting up separate departments for the social sciences, economists as a rule maintained their status aparte. In spite of such remaining barriers between related fields, the overall constellation of the three encompassing groups of disciplines became increasingly manifest. Interestingly, in their mutual division of labour the ‘new’ faculties continued a pattern already formed by their predecessors. The central areas of concern for Theology, Medicine, and Law were, so to speak, the soul, the body, and justice; in the new faculties these were superseded by culture, nature, and society. The similarities in the direction of interest make the differences in scope and method stand out even more clearly: the empirical subject matter of the new faculties is far more extensive, and it is to a much lesser degree determined by specific professional requirements.

The relationship between the old and the new faculties is, of course, more complicated than a simple ‘succession’ with straight lines of ‘descent’. The three new faculties have not simply replaced the old ones; the old faculties still continue to exist, and all sorts of influences may be traced across older and newer areas of research and education. The important fact remains, all the same, that the three new faculties are marked by a broader field of studies and a weaker tie to specific professional practices. With their greater freedom from practical restrictions, they have always been more strongly committed to the idea that the pursuit of knowledge is a worthwhile value in its own right.

The ideal of knowledge for knowledge’s sake was surely not a nineteenth century novelty. In the preceding centuries, an intellectual culture had been developing in which literary studies and scientific research took pride of place. This development had largely occurred outside the universities, however. It was primarily the work of cultured aristocrats and patricians who not only found diversion in sonatas and sonnets but also in historical and philological investigations and in chemical and physical experiments. Some of them, such as Christian Huygens or Edmund Gibbon, could finance research by their own means; others, like Voltaire in his scientific moods, worked with the aid of rich friends (who in his case happened to be female). This long pre-university stage, marked by the founding and flourishing of the Royal Academies in England and France, no doubt contributed to the nineteenth century boom in the ‘pure sciences’. Thanks to the patronage of and active participation by members of the highest circles in the preceding era, there was already a great ‘prestige by association’ attached to the free pursuit of knowledge.

More impulses were given to the culture of pure research as, throughout the nineteenth century, new opportunities arose for experts who could devote their careers entirely to the acquisition and transmission of specialised knowledge. Whatever further social skills these people might have was considered of secondary importance – as illustrated by the abundant jokes about absent-minded professors. By analogy with clerical, military, and governmental hierarchies, a scholarly hierarchy was formed, with knowledge as its main criterion. Especially in secondary schools this criterion became pre-eminent: the efforts of the teachers were primarily aimed at imparting material for the exams, and the students’ success was measured by the degree to which they could show they had mastered this material.

2. The relationships between the new faculties: cognitive aspects
What can be noted with most certainty about the threefold division of university disciplines into humanities, natural sciences and social sciences, is that it conforms with generally established institutional arrangements. This having been said, the question arises of whether there is any further, more fundamental rationale underlying it. To what extent are the lines along which the ‘new’ faculties have been divided also intellectually compelling?
Given their strong emphasis on cognition it is no wonder that the scholars and scientists themselves tend to assume that the tripartition is not primarily due to a social process of institutionalization, but is implied in the nature of reality itself. If pressed for an argument, they will explain that the world they study is in itself heterogeneous, consisting of various levels or aspects which are so divergent that their investigation requires groups of disciplines with very specific methods and techniques.
This train of thought may be found in each of the three areas. As a lucid recent example I take the introduction by the biologist, Richard Dawkins, to his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, one of the avowed purposes of which is to underpin the scientific status of the theory of evolution. (Dawkins, 1986) According to Dawkins, the world studied by scientists is composed of two sorts of things – living and dead. They are distinguished by their varying degrees of complexity. Dead things are relatively simple; their structure and behaviour is determined by relatively few variables. If you throw a non-living object, such as a dead bird, into the air, it will describe a parabola the course of which can be calculated according to the laws of physics. The dead bird is a projectile; if we know with what force it is thrown in a particular direction, we can predict precisely where it will land.

With a living bird things are less simple. You may hold it in your hand and throw it with the same force in the same direction, but it is by no means certain where it will reach the ground again. Of course, the laws of physics remain valid, for the body continues to be subject to the forces of gravity and wind resistance. At the same time, however, there are other principles at play determining the bird’s flight. Living things are more complicated than dead things; therefore, Dawkins states, we need a different kind of science to study them. Physics is the science of dead, biology of living things.

For those readers who might wish to object that physics is far from being a simple science, Dawkins has a brief and pithy reply: the science of physics should not be confused with its object. The science of physics is a product of the human brain; the human brain is a living thing, and that explains why physics is a complicated subject and not easy to learn.

Dawkins’ argument may be read in two ways: as a general and largely disinterested treatise on the theory of science, and as a special plea for his own subject, biology. He takes issue with the hegemonical aspirations of physicists who claim that theirs is the only true science and that all scientific problems can be reduced to problems of physics. Against this one-sided physical reductionism Dawkins puts forward his own model in which there is room for the two sciences of living and of dead matter. He still argues exclusively from the perspective of the natural sciences, however, and he seems to take it for granted that physics and biology together are capable of answering all scientifically relevant questions. The humanities and the social sciences come off very poorly; in so far as the research done in these fields is worthy of the name ‘science’, it is nothing but a form of applied biology.

Now this opinion clearly challenges the status of the humanities and the social sciences. In meeting that challenge, we may note, first of all, that many physicists today no longer subscribe to the idea that ‘the stuff of physics’ is characterized by a relatively low degree of complexity. As Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers put it in the opening sentence of their book *Order out of Chaos*: ‘Our view of nature is undergoing a radical change toward the multiple, the temporal, and the complex.’ (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984: xxvii) With this statement they are referring to the level of the smallest particles as well as to that of cosmic processes. At both levels it turns out to be possible not only to observe highly complex phenomena but also to make these phenomena accessible to theoretically relevant research. On these grounds Dawkins’ argument needs some revision. There is no reason, however, to reject its central point, concerning the hierarchical structure of reality. Even if the lower forms of organization at the level of physics prove to be more complicated than he assumes, we can only conclude that this greater complexity is also present in the living organisms with which biologists are concerned. The complexity of dead things is included, and only seems to add to, the complexity of living things.

But this does not imply that biologists always have to deal with both levels of complexity. Processes at a higher level may be relatively autonomous with regard to processes at a lower level. It is this principle of relative autonomy which enables biologists to describe and explain the behaviour of cells, organisms, and biotopes, without having to expound every detail at the level of physics. The peculiarity of that small part of the universe which happens to be living is not just characterized by greater complexity but also by certain dynamics of its own. Because of these relatively autonomous dynamics of living systems we need not constantly refer to their complexity at the atomic level in order to describe and explain their behaviour at the organic and the social level. If this principle may be applied to make the case for biology, why may it not be equally well applied to the social sciences and the humanities?

It is in this respect that I find Dawkins’ attempt to reduce all sciences to either physics or biology untenable. His arguments may be ingenious and they need not even be incompatible with a recognition of the complexity of ‘the stuff of physics’. He goes wrong, however, in conceiving of human knowledge in purely biological terms. By maintaining that science is product of ‘the human brain’ Dawkins suggests that we are only dealing with separate organs operating independently in each individual. It is far more realistic, however, to regard knowledge as originating in a virtual
endless chain of connections between human brains – a configuration that is usually referred to as ‘culture’.

In a sense, this last idea may even be used to reverse Dawkins’s entire argument. If, indeed, every form of science is a product of culture, it may be examined as such. Thus, for example, the paleoanthropologist, Misia Landau, has found that the principles of ‘narrative structure’ discovered by Vladimir Propp in the analysis of fairy-tales can be made to apply to theories about the descent of Homo sapiens. (Landau, 1984, and Lewin, 1987: 30-46) As she demonstrates, within Dawkins’ own field, the theory of evolution, models of thought and presentation are employed which show remarkable structural similarities with folk tales. This observation may serve to temper the hubris of natural scientists. It is particularly persuasive since Landau does not lapse into the facile counterpart of scientism – the equally parochial textism or textualism which reduces all of reality to texts.

Some practitioners of the humanities indeed appear to think that they can get the better of the natural scientists by interpreting the latter’s work in terms of ‘discourse’ or ‘idiom’. In doing so, they can refer to a simple syllogism: all science is expressed in language; language is the domain of linguistics; therefore a scientific theory of science should be based upon linguistics. Embroidering on such ideas they may go to the extremes of pure textualism in which nature only appears as a ‘text’ which can be ‘read’ in various ways. This would leave the final say to the linguists, the reading experts par excellence.

Although such scriptural arguments may be logically consistent, their implications are equally as sterile as those of physical reductionism. The investigation of nature is indeed a mental activity, and those who engage in it are working in a cultural tradition. It would be nonsensical, however, to regard these traditions as entirely autonomous constructions, floating freely over reality. Every culture in itself comprises the experience derived by people from the real world of which they form a part.

The theory of science which best avoids reductions ad absurdum in the direction of both physics and metaphysics is still, in my view, the one for which the foundations were laid more than a century and a half ago by the sociologist, Auguste Comte. This theory was later elaborated by Emile Durkheim, and in our own time it has been further articulated by Norbert Elias, among others. We may by now speak of a collective product, although (and this is typical of the state of knowledge in this area) various individual nuances are still discernible. (Durkheim, 1938, and Elias, 1978a)

The sociological theory of the sciences, like Dawkins’ theory, may be read in two ways. We may view it purely as an intellectual attempt at indicating, to the best of our knowledge, those properties of the known universe that give the most adequate foundation for the division of labour in the sciences. We may also regard it with more suspicion as the ideology with which a group of professionals, sociologists in this case, try to legitimate their own position. The fact that the theory performs the second function does not necessarily discredit its more general validity. Acknowledging the possible ideological uses of the theory may sharpen our critical sense; but its more general cognitive value can only be assessed on the basis of substantive arguments.

The theory emphasizes in particular that the levels which may be distinguished in reality differ not only according to complexity but also to ‘specificity’. All known matter is subject to the laws of physics, but only a specific part of it, the part that happens to be self-reproducing, is also subject to the laws of biology. In an even smaller and still more specific part, other principles again operate – principles which, in turn, exercise some influence upon the lower levels. While thus adding a special emphasis to Dawkins’ view, the theory is in full agreement with the elegant opening sentence of The Blind Watchmaker: ‘We animals are the most complicated things in the known universe’. (Dawkins, 1986: 1) Every human being is a physical body which, when stepping into a bathtub, conforms to Archimedes’ law of volume and weight and, when jumping from a springboard, to Newton’s laws of gravity. In addition, every human being is a body in a biological sense, an organism with blood circulating in accordance with the principles discovered by Harvey. But, then, every human being is also a thinking and talking creature, a member of groups and a carrier of culture. Naturally Dawkins recognizes these latter qualities, but he fails to accord them a separate place in his model of the sciences. For him, the principle of relative autonomy ceases to be relevant beyond the level of genes and cells. However, if the behaviour of cells cannot fully be explained by the laws of physics, neither can the behaviour of human beings fully be explained by the principles of biology. In living systems, the very behaviour of atoms and molecules happens to be determined to a large extent by the cells of which they form a part, the behaviour of the cells in question by the organisms.

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2 Cf. the definition of culture (still in terms derived from biology) as ‘essentially a matter of each person utilizing the nervous systems of other persons’. Johnson (1946: 162-163).
and the behaviour of the organisms by the groups to which they belong and by the knowledge they have acquired as group members. Any attempt to ignore these hierarchical relationships, and to account for the higher levels of complexity and specificity represented by human groups and human cultures in terms of cells and genes is not only inefficient, but futile.

If Dawkins' own line of reasoning leads us to recognize that there is more in the world to be studied than physics and biology can cope with, there arises the question of whether his criteria for demarcating biology from physics can also be made to apply to those fields which deal with the higher levels of complexity and specificity in the human world. If there were a straight analogy between the two groups of disciplines, that would enable us to draw up a fourfold scheme, instead of the triad that has actually developed in the institutional structure of the universities. On the one hand, there would be the 'natural' sciences of physics and biology; on the other hand there would be the humanities and the social sciences. The humanities, we might continue, would be primarily concerned with that relatively autonomous aspect of reality known as 'culture', and the social sciences with 'society' as comprising the interrelationships between human beings.

The formulation sounds temptingly neat; but it is highly questionable whether the distinction between 'culture' and 'society' can be made solid enough to sustain such far reaching implications. I shall return to this problem later. First I wish to point to a remarkable fact. Theoretically, the main line of demarcation between physics and biology appears to be rather evident; yet the practitioners of both fields generally consent to being classified together under the common label of the natural sciences. The reverse is true of the relationships between the humanities and the social sciences. Here, there seems to be far more common ground, and the boundaries are much less easily drawn. Nevertheless, many practitioners of these fields continue to set great store by the distinction, and they are certainly not prepared to unite under one banner equivalent to that of the natural sciences. This peculiar discrepancy calls for an inspection of issues that are of not just an intrinsically theoretical nature. Perhaps it is not only the ordering of reality into levels of varying complexity and specificity that provides the clue to understanding the separation of the humanities and the social sciences. We may have to look at other factors the impact of which is more difficult to pinpoint — factors concerning the hierarchical ordering of society. It is to these issues, which are usually not dealt with in either ontology or methodology, that I shall now turn.

3. The relationships between the three new faculties: social aspects

At several places above I have already made reference to specifically 'social' motives, especially with respect to the hierarchy of disciplines. This could not be avoided. In the actual 'contest of the faculties', arguments put forward as strictly theoretical have repeatedly been mixed with issues relating to the status hierarchy and competition among the practitioners of different fields — both within and beyond the university.3

As is to be expected, the very theoretical inconsistencies of the threefold classification reflect longstanding practical arrangements. Not only are physicists and biologists indiscriminately lumped together as 'natural scientists', the triad also simply ignores the 'old' faculties. These, on their part, have not let themselves be incorporated into the new scheme. As a faculty, Medicine has not merged into the natural sciences; nor has Law joined the social sciences; nor even has Theology always surrendered to the humanities. The old faculties have by and large maintained themselves — not by virtue of a splendidly consistent theory of knowledge but because of their firm links with professional training. As long as their graduates found a comfortable social niche awaiting them, there was little reason for trying to justify the curriculum with epistemological arguments.

Right up to today, at every university there are two distinct hierarchies of prestige. One is intrinsically academic, based upon scientific and scholastic accomplishments, with the Nobel Prize as the paramount distinction. The other one is mainly determined by such 'extra-academic' criteria as social background, wealth, and political influence. Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators have shown that, in France, the newer faculties of the natural sciences and the humanities rank highest on the 'intra-academic' scale, whereas the older faculties of law and medicine are still on top 'extra-academically'. (Bourdieu, 1988)

From the start, the new faculties have tried to legitimate their existence by appealing to a general ideal of knowledge, not directly linked to practical achievements. The old faculties had little use for this ideal of pure knowledge since professional practice dictated what the students had to learn. The only exception was philosophy, the womb out of which the new faculties were to spring. For philosophers objective knowledge was indeed a supreme value; but with their unworldly attitude they occupied the last and lowest position in the traditional rank-order of the four faculties.

3 The part played by competition in the intellectual community has been emphasized most strongly by Mannheim (1927). See also Bailey (1977).
Indeed, the degree to which the practitioners of an academic discipline can permit themselves to be indifferent towards epistemological problems may well be a measure of the intellectual autonomy and social prestige of that discipline. There is no urgent need for legitimation on theoretical grounds in fields which rank highly in terms of either scientific success or general social status.

The older faculties, generally not given to excessive self-reflection, tended to take as their primary sources of knowledge — to put it in single catchwords — revelation, reason, tradition, and experience. It would, of course, be impossible to attribute the body of knowledge of an entire faculty to any one of these four sources. Yet there were clearly diverging preferences. In theology revelation ranked first, in philosophy reason, in law tradition (rather than experience), and in medicine experience (rather than reason). The new faculties have never recognized revelation; the closest to it that they may accept as a source of knowledge is intuition. The natural sciences rely almost completely on the experimental method, combining experience and reason. In the social sciences there is a strong tendency to follow the same model, but the possibilities for experimentation are severely limited. Respect for tradition is strongest in the humanities; this corresponds to the affinity with theology, philosophy, and law that I noted before.

Something of the hierarchy between the older and the newer faculties resounds in the relationships among the new faculties themselves. Bourdieu’s findings for France seem to apply to other European countries as well: the natural sciences tend to be most successful by scientific standards, the humanities in various forms of ‘extra-academic’ prestige. The social sciences do not score highly on either scale.

In the Netherlands, signs of Bourdieu’s dual prestige hierarchy may already be noted at the gymnasion, the traditional preparatory school for the universities. Even though the brightest pupils generally choose the ‘science’ stream of the curriculum, those who are in the ‘classics’ section may still feel in a certain way superior — by exhibiting an undefinable je-ne-sais-quoi which probably has its roots in the culture of the nobility and the high clergy. The humanities at Dutch universities retain many more of the vestiges of this ‘higher’ culture than any of the other new faculties. Ever since their very first founding, most universities stood in an ambivalent relation with the church. As indicated by the general use of Latin, ties with the First Estate, the clergy, were initially strong. At quite an early stage, however, the faculties managed to loosen this bond. They were aided by the rise of modern states which soon began encouraging the use of

a national vernacular, including its use in the influential Royal Academies. Consequently, the new faculties of the nineteenth century did not have to go to any great lengths to free themselves from bondage to the First Estate. The major relic of such bondage, knowledge of Latin and Greek, as a requirement for university admission, has been abolished almost everywhere. The natural sciences and the social sciences have led the way, and the humanities have followed suit — even if occasionally a note of nostalgia for the traditional language of the First Estate may resound, as in the re-emergence of the word humaniora in the Netherlands.

The ideal of knowledge for knowledge’s sake has yielded the most lucrative returns in the natural sciences. As in the humanities, graduates could find employment as teachers. The prestige of these disciplines came to depend much more, however, upon the increasingly frequent applications of their findings in industry. Technology and science developed in a process of cross-fertilisation, stimulated by rapidly expanding commercial and military interests. (cf. Willink, 1988)

The efforts made in the social sciences at emulating the natural sciences in this respect have remained of little avail. Economists have done best; their mathematically sophisticated models have become a regular feature in managerial decision making in both private and governmental organizations. All concerned agree, however, that the models are used only for want of anything better; their predictive power is far below that of models in the natural sciences.

The practitioners of the humanities prefer to seek their strength in other qualities such as a command of languages, a sense of history, connoisseurship, and erudition — attributes that are traditionally cultivated in the higher social circles. While in the humanities these qualities continue to be appreciated as signs of cultural competence, their function in the social class structure is seldom openly discussed. Of course, no serious scholar would dream of denying the existence of social class differences as such; but it is another matter to recognize their impact upon one’s own cultural values. The general tendency in the humanities is to carry on the tradition of bourgeois intellectuals who, resisting the hegemony of the Second Estate, the nobility, even more than that of the First Estate, have developed an ideal of culture that may best be characterized as ‘quasi-classless’. In its universalistic formulations this ideal may seem to be elevated far above all concerns of social class; yet it clearly reflects the social habitus of middle
class groups in the process of ascending in the status hierarchy by deploying their intellectual powers.4

This habitus still colours the relationship of the humanities vis-à-vis the natural and the social sciences. Although it is rarely said in so many words, the latter in particular are regarded as somewhat vulgar. Even if they are no longer suspected of being socialist in disguise, they still seem to represent the even more formidable threat of levelling, standardization, secularization, and 'disenchantment of the world'. Even that branch of the social sciences which has been socially most successful, economics, does not escape from the general disapproval. To many practitioners of the humanities it, too, smacks of the vulgar, if only because of the object which it puts into the centre of attention: money – a plain theme, which is being studied with mathematical models borrowed from the natural sciences and without any attempt at literary elegance.

The differences between the humanities and the social sciences have, from the very first, been marked by both subject matter and point of view. If the social sciences are primarily concerned with the interrelationships among people and the institutions in the context of which these interrelationships occur, the humanities find their themes first of all in the products of the human mind, in culture. Moreover, social scientists have a predilection for tracing and explaining regularities, while students of the humanities set great store by understanding singular events and achievements. Interestingly, the 'cognitive' and the 'social' differences between the two fields seem here to converge. The purely epistemological issues discussed in the preceding section are subtly fused with other issues which are usually not included in the official academic agenda but which, nevertheless, exert a strong influence upon both choice of subject matter and method. The crucial point at which the two dimensions intersect is the tacit propensity for studying phenomena with a high social and cultural prestige. The priorities of intellectual interest are thus remarkably in correspondence with the hierarchical ordering of society, which also shows a congruence between the singular or the specific on the one hand and the eminent or the powerful on the other. A kingdom consists of one king and many subjects; everyone knows the name of the king, nobody knows the names of all the subjects.

History books reflect these relationships: they mention the names of the kings, and leave the subjects anonymous.

In societies with an hierarchical structure, people's attention from the bottom to the top is directed toward individual persons, and from the top to the bottom it is directed toward collectives without proper names: peasants, tax payers, recruits. 'For most people are in the dark, and only a few are in the light'. Something of this asymmetry may be recognized in the preoccupations of the humanities and the social sciences. The former are first of all interested in concretely named individuals, works of art, and unique events; the latter in recurrent patterns, underlying structures, and over-all processes. In other words, from a similar position in the middle of the social hierarchy the humanities tend to look upward, and the social sciences downward.

I realize that this is in itself an example of a highly generalized sociological statement which immediately needs to be modified by individual exceptions. Modern research in the humanities is often substantiated by statistical methods, while some of the most successful work in the social sciences consists of individual case studies. This does not detract from the dominant style of either field, however. The highest esteem in the humanities continues to be accorded to studies whose theme is historically and culturally specific, whereas the most prestigious work in the social sciences is presented in such a fashion as to make it relevant to more general theoretical issues.

Summing up, I would conclude that the humanities and the social sciences do indeed exhibit clear differences in subject matter and method. These differences may be explained only in part on purely theoretical grounds, however. The epistemological arguments for a demarcation between the two fields need to be supplemented by an analysis of its sociogenesis. The demarcation line is determined not only by the nature of reality as we know it but also by the hierarchical structure of our societies.

4. Implications

It has been observed that today the problem of classification of disciplines is of interest to librarians only. (Stichweh, 1984: 9) In the daily practice of their work most scholars and scientists do, indeed, have no reason to worry about it. Still, university administrations and research councils continue to find themselves faced with problems of co-ordination – problems that may become particularly pressing now that, under the pressures of continuing specialization, the boundaries of the smaller units formed by disciplines are also becoming increasingly less clear. It would be misguided to deal with the ensuing problems as merely organizational issues without considering the cognitive interrelations among the various disciplines and

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their potential contributions to each other. The time has not yet come to consider the matter of classification as closed.  

Surely any theoretical classification can only be a rationalization in retrospect. As Karl Popper has ingeniously demonstrated in a famous argument, it is impossible to predict the growth of knowledge. (Popper, 1957: v-vi) Both the current state of scientific knowledge at any given moment and the attempts at systematizing it (which aim at the formation of knowledge on a higher level of synthesis) form part of long-term processes the course of which has been neither foreseen nor planned.

Viewed in the broadest possible perspective, the development of human knowledge forms a part of an all-embracing master trend – the gradual expansion of human hegemony over more and more other living species. (cf. Goudsblom, 1990) Step by step, at an accelerating pace, human groups have extended their control over nature. They have been able to do so by developing new means both of social organization, enabling them to operate in increasingly larger groups, and of cultural communication, enabling each generation to hand over some of its own experiences to its successors. Clearly, this entire process has not been guided by any foreknowledge or plan. In retrospect we may look upon it in such a way as to recognize the familiar triad of ‘nature’, ‘society’, and ‘culture’. Viewed in this light, the distinctions underlying the division into the three ‘new’ faculties, and adumbrated already in the older faculties, seem to be rooted in the prehistory of human society. But while such a ‘paleo-sociological’ perspective may reveal a comparable triad of major strands in the general evolution of humanity, an equally evident corollary has to be that these strands always have been interconnected. No control over nature would have been possible without social organization, no social organization without culture.

As long as we keep an eye open for the interconnections it may still make sense to distinguish between natural, social, and cultural phenomena. The distinction refers to an ontological continuum, with a corresponding methodological continuum. Within this continuum we should not expect to find clear demarcations; the lines are blurred, especially those marking the boundaries between the domains of society and culture. Language or music or mathematics may indeed be regarded as cultural phenomena in their own right, with a degree of autonomy which warrants studying them in separate disciplines. At the same time, it is evident that their autonomy is relative, and that there is always a social dimension to these phenomena – even to mathematics. Similarly, there is a cultural dimension to the subject-matter of such disciplines as economics or psychology which, in their search for regularities in their own field, tend not to let themselves be diverted by the issue of culture.

Psychology in particular presents us with a case that seems to defy the tripartition of nature, society, and culture. On its broad behaviouristic flanks it leans heavily towards the natural sciences. Yet it also shares with the humanities a concern with understanding the motives of individual action. Not surprisingly, given these somewhat hybrid inclinations, in the institutional structure it is usually grouped together with the social sciences. Such ambiguities bear witness to the fact that the actual divisions among the three faculties have not been planned according to a preconceived rational scheme. Their internal structure and their mutual relationships continue to reflect their origins at universities in societies with a pervasive hierarchy of prestige and power.

As a result, the institutional arrangements probably exaggerate the differences in styles of research and education that would be necessary for cognitive reasons only. Increasingly, however, these differences of style tend to be reproduced within individual disciplines among both the cultural and the social sciences. Thus in history we find ‘cliometricians’ along with narrative historians, and even individuals combining both roles. There is, in short, more common ground than meets the eye at first sight. Measured by the extremes, the dominant styles continue to be recognizably different. But when we take a closer look at individual disciplines in the humanities, we often see a remarkable receptivity to concepts and methods from the social or, as in archaeology, even the natural sciences. And in the social sciences, especially in anthropology, there are attempts to enrich the repertoire of analysis with such concepts as metaphor and narrative derived from the study of literature.

When Caxton in the fifteenth century first pointed to ‘humanity’ as a subject of learning, he had no reason whatever to demarcate it from something to be called ‘social science’. For him, even the study of nature belonged to ‘humanity’. In our time the natural sciences have emancipated themselves almost completely and seem to have left the social and the cultural sciences far behind in their capacity of discovery and application. It is partly due to the sense of losing ground to the natural sciences, I think, that in the faculties of Letters in the Netherlands the urge for a closer affiliation with the old faculties of Theology, Law, and Philosophy has manifested itself.

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5 For further discussion of the interplay of organizational and intellectual issues see Whitley, 1984.
This trend may also help to explain why the term humanities or, in the absence of a vernacular equivalent, humaniora, is becoming fashionable. Not only is 'Letters' a somewhat inappropriate denominator for such fields as numismatics or musicology, it is also unlikely to be fully acceptable to members of the more ancient faculties. The idea of joining the humanities, however, may not sound objectionable to them; the time when this term was first launched as a banner against the theologians and the lawyers is long forgotten.

In so far as closer affiliation between the faculty of Letters and some of the older faculties represents a step toward further integration, not only at the organizational but also at the intellectual level, it is to be applauded. It may also imply a few drawbacks, however. One possible disadvantage is that the ideal of the pursuit of knowledge as something valuable in its own right may be subordinated to technical standards of professional training. The overtures toward Theology and Law may also lead to an alienation from the Social Sciences. As I hope to have shown, however, such a tendency would be unlikely to continue for long.

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