



Book Review

Anders Ekström and Hampus Östh Gustafsson (eds.)

The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge: The Impact and Organization of the Humanities in Sweden, 1850–2020

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press
2022, 294 pp.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands in spring 2020, a public debate arose on whether historians should become actively involved in advising the Dutch government, whose management of the pandemic was seen as inadequate and too technocratic. In the newspaper NRC (2020a), four renowned humanities professors argued that historical expertise is of vital importance for comprehending the long-term causes and effects of health crises in modern societies. However, critics challenged the direct social relevance of such humanistic knowledge, asserting that it is not possible to derive lessons from history (NRC 2020b).

I was reminded of this debate in my home country while reading Anders Ekström and Hampus Östh Gustafsson's edited volume on the "impact and organization" of the humanities in modern Sweden, which recently appeared in the Studies in the History of Knowledge book series of Amsterdam University Press. From their *The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge*—which includes twelve chapters in total, including a conceptually rich introduction—it becomes crystal clear that

debates on the societal value of the humanities have a long history.

The volume shows how the humanities were culturally and politically marginalized in twentieth-century Sweden. Especially during the postwar period, Swedish social-democratic policy was oriented almost exclusively on social and natural-scientific knowledge, while the societal value of the humanities was being questioned. Thus emerged an "explicit and long-standing discourse of crisis" (p. 29) within the Swedish humanities. Several chapters in the volume demonstrate how Swedish humanities scholars developed strategies for legitimization in this perceived climate of crisis: for example, they emphasized the "critical function" of the humanities (Östh Gustafsson, chapter 6) or tried to stretch the meaning of usefulness beyond instrumental values and economic utility (Anna Tunlid, chapter 11).

Other chapters in the volume provide examples of how humanistic knowledge was nevertheless successfully utilized and made socially relevant outside of non-academic contexts. Humanistic studies on culture, history, and language turned out to be surprisingly useful, for example, in the context of Swedish defense research (Fredrik Bertilsson, chapter 10). Another context of application of the humanities in modern Sweden is detailed by Martin Jansson in chapter 3, who interprets the fascinating origin story of a Swedish Bible translation from 1917 as a "history of applied knowledge" (p. 76).

By unearthing how the humanities operated and sought for legitimation in

non-academic contexts, the editors of *The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge* aim to inspire new lines of research within the young and vibrant field of the history of the humanities. In their introduction, Ekström and Östh Gustafsson plead for a much less “introverted” (p. 25) history of the humanities, which looks beyond strictly academic contexts and pays sufficient attention to the embeddedness of humanistic knowledge in modern societies. Although I am more optimistic than the editors regarding prior efforts of historians of humanities to look beyond “a standard history of disciplinary formations [and] epistemological turns” (p. 12), I must acknowledge that they admirably succeed in their aim to “provide an impetus for a multifaceted understanding of the function of humanistic knowledge in modern society” (p. 11).

One of the key achievements of this volume, of particular interest to readers of this journal, is its exploration of profound connections between the history of humanities and the history of education. The chapter on “pedagogy and the humanities” by Joakim Landahl and Anna Larsson stands out in this regard. The authors highlight that, in the nineteenth century, when the humanities were still culturally dominant in Sweden (as also becomes clear from chapter 2 by Isak Hammar), their most important value for society was to train secondary school teachers. However, in the twentieth century, this pedagogical function of the Swedish humanities was lost. Landahl and Larsson interestingly suggest that as a result of their “unwillingness ... to engage in vocational aspects of teacher training” the Swedish humanities “ended up outside and

seemingly irrelevant to the huge expansion of the welfare state school system.” Since the Swedish humanities have not yet acquired an equally clear social function ever since, they “still have to struggle with this legacy” (p. 100).

Thematic and conceptual coherence is another striking and praiseworthy feature of *The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge*. The central concept of “knowledge politics,” which is coined in the introduction to capture “how societies have valued and politicized the organization and division of different branches of knowledge” (p. 17), is consistently used throughout the book. Furthermore, the notion of “public arena of knowledge” (a physical, textual, or medial place enabling the circulation of knowledge, p. 157), which is introduced by Johan Östling, Anton Jansson, and Ragni Svensson in chapter 7, finds fruitful application in later chapters (e.g. Martin Jansson, chapter 3; Sven Widmalm, chapter 8). The notion of “arenas of knowledge” has also demonstrated to be useful within the scope of the recent special issue on the histories of knowledge and education in this journal (Lundberg 2022, 5–7).

In conclusion, this important publication effectively presents a wealth of historical material from the Swedish context to an international and interdisciplinary audience of historians, including but not limited to those specializing in the histories of (humanistic) knowledge and education. That said, I would have welcomed more in-depth reflection on how this Swedish history of the social impact and organization of the humanities must be understood in relation to global developments. The editors interestingly point out that the

national case of Sweden is a relevant one partly because of the nation's shifting orientation from German to American knowledge politics. But unfortunately, the volume provides limited insight into the reasons behind this shift. To further enhance the value and comprehensibility of the volume, it would have been advantageous to more systematically examine the political and academic exchanges with Germany and the United States that shaped modern Swedish knowledge politics. Such transnational historical research would offer a fruitful angle to further pursue the promising line of inquiry into the social impact of the humanities, which has been so effectively introduced in this volume.

References

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