

Introduction

Questioning Value

Anneloek Scholten

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing pressure on scholars in the humanities to articulate the value of their work in terms of measurable social, cultural, or economic ‘impact.’ In light of these developments, this year’s theme for the Utrecht University annual Humanities Graduate Conference was ‘What’s the Point? Impact and the Future of the Humanities.’ This issue of *Junctions* developed in close collaboration with this conference, and is centered around the topic of ‘Questioning Value.’ What does value mean in the context of academia? How are the humanities dealing with the validity of their research, and with financial pressure? In this issue, articles and book reviews of junior scholars are brought together to critically reflect on these, and more, questions.

For policymakers, value is often equated with financial profit. In May 2019, the UK Department of Education issued a report to review higher education and funding. This report called for the government to adjust financial support for different degrees to reflect their social and economic ‘value.’ Their recommendations are partly based on the salary of graduates: according to the report, graduates who study arts, languages, history, and philosophy do not see any major salary benefits compared to peers in their field without university degrees, and therefore subjects such as arts and design do not ‘constitute good value for taxpayers’ money’ (Department of Education, 2019: 84). Nigel Carrington, vice-chancellor of the University of the Arts London, expressed his concern that the current Secretary of Education focuses too much on the incomes of early-career graduates to define value for taxpayers’ money, and that the report was written with the intention to reduce the number of students pursuing degrees in the arts and humanities (Fazackerley, 2019). The report’s focus is explicitly on financial returns: the panel claims that ‘the current method of university funding has resulted in an *accidental over-investment* in some subjects and an under-investment in others that is at odds with the government’s Industrial Strategy and with taxpayers’ interests’ (Department of Education, 2019, p. 84, emphasis added). In other words, because U.K. graduates in humanities subjects do not earn as much money, their degrees are perceived to be worthless.

IN DEFENSE OF THE HUMANITIES

Scholars in the humanities, of course, do not typically agree with this assessment. The last decade has seen the publication of several books arguing for the value of humanities research. One well-known

example is Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit* (2010), in which she argues for the democratic importance of the humanities. Nussbaum claims that capitalism and nationalism produce systems of education that 'are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive' (2010: 2) and that abilities crucial to the health of democratic societies — such as 'the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a "citizen of the world"; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person' (2010: 7) — are all associated with the arts and humanities. According to Nussbaum, an education in the humanities is therefore vital for cultivating sympathy and keeping democracies alive.

Nussbaum is correct in pointing out that many universities and policymakers choose to downsize or eliminate humanities departments (2010: 123) and that research is increasingly 'driven by the demand for "impact,"' recasting the question of value based on the model of research in the sciences (2010: 128). Nevertheless, her argument has been challenged by scholars like Helen Small who believe that 'we should treat with caution any version [of an argument for the value of the humanities] that lends unduly narrowed and exclusive importance to the humanities on the basis of their (serious, but not *definitive*) role in assisting informed and properly critical perspectives on social and political life' (2013: 6). Moreover, to say that undermining *institutionalized* humanities research and teaching undermines critical thinking and sympathy seems to be an exaggeration: Simon During points out that the assumption that the humanities are 'essentially academic' is an oversimplification, since 'many of the most significant scholarly and theoretical contributions' to the development of the humanities - if it is understood as developing out of European humanism - 'were written outside the academy' (2017: 3). As examples, he lists thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Nietzsche. However, During also acknowledges that the disciplines of the humanities teach valuable skills. While he qualifies Nussbaum's claim that undermining the humanities in educational systems could cause democracies to collapse, During believes that the ability to think logically, critically, and dialectically; to have a sense of historical awareness; to grasp the bigger picture; and to assess the quality of different versions of texts and images, are all skills that, though not confined to the humanities, 'do thrive and expand there' (2019: 6).

Ultimately, many commonly employed claims for the value of the humanities rest on somewhat shaky ground. In *The Value of the Humanities* (2013), Small outlines some common claims for the value of the humanities: they matter because 'they study the meaning-making practices of the culture, focusing on interpretation and evaluation with an indispensable element of subjectivity' (2013: 4); they are important precisely because they are useless and therefore removed 'from accounts of practical ends and economic utility' prioritized by many contemporary Western governments (2013: 4); they matter because they make us happy; or because they are necessary for democratic society, as in Nussbaum. She also points out that some scholars argue that the humanities matter 'for their own sake,' a claim 'resting

on a conviction that the humanities have good effects in the world by their impact on our cultural life, our happiness, our politics' (2013: 6). She explains why she believes these arguments do not always hold up under close scrutiny, either because of a lack of evidentiary support or because, according to Small, attempts 'to secure the claim to intrinsic value' are often influential but 'not, finally, the ground humanities scholars want to be on' (2013, p. 6). She believes the latter claim is too subjective and unstable in public and political debate. Moreover, as Elena Belfiore points out, those who resist the so-called 'impact agenda' might do so out of an 'unwarranted sense of academic entitlement,' ignoring society's legitimate demands for researchers to be 'at the beating heart of our contemporary public sphere' in favor of their self-interest (Belfiore, 2015: 101). However, while both Small and Belfiore outline some of the weaknesses of arguments for the humanities in the contemporary debate, neither offers a clear alternative.

Moreover, alongside the common arguments outlined by Small, external pressures from governments and funding bodies have resulted in an increasing tendency of researchers in the humanities to justify their *own* worth in monetary terms: instead of claiming (intrinsic, democratic, political) value, some reports now attempt to convince politicians and policymakers that the humanities are, in fact, profitable (Belfiore, 2015: 105-6). The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council publishes annual reports to provide information on the economic impact of the research that they have funded; in the past, they have claimed that the creative economy 'contributes to more than 8% of the UK economy' and that the AHRC fuels economic growth by advancing business models and contributing to the tourism industry (AHRC, 2017: 3). In an AHRC-funded project called 'Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture' (2016), Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska claim that cultural engagement promotes innovation and that the cultural sector thereby contributes to the economy even without measurable economic impact (99). In *Cents and Sensibility*, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro even argue that the humanities offer economists ways to produce more realistic models and more effective policies (2018). However, the long-term financial impact of humanities research is typically difficult to prove, and claims for the profitability of the humanities, therefore, tend to be unstable.

Because so many defenses of the humanities fail to stand up to rigorous examination, During believes that perhaps we should stop working so hard to defend ourselves. In an impassioned article entitled 'Stop Defending the Humanities' (2014), he writes that the humanities 'are not the kind of thing that can be defended by reference to a single practice or even set of practices, a single value or set of values,' and that our own love and passion for our fields of study 'offers no substantive *public* reason to maintain them' (2014, emphasis added). He believes that many claims about the value of the humanities are reductive or confuse self-interest and public interest and that we should 'stop regarding ourselves as *necessary* to any future healthy society whatsoever' (2014). Instead, he argues that we should 'make our case for the humanities in more modest terms that are more narrowly directed to those who most matter

in this context' (2014, emphasis added), although it is unclear to whom he is referring. Evidently, scholars in the humanities disagree on how – and even whether – to argue for the value and importance of the (institutional) humanities. Some (such as Small) believe that many current arguments are flawed, and others (such as Daring) argue that perhaps we should stop defending the humanities at all.

Where does that leave us? If anything, the above only shows that the question of value is complex and that it produces many answers and divided opinions. Both within and outside the humanities, scholars disagree on the question of why the humanities are valuable to society, and some question whether they can be defended as (publicly) valuable at all. This issue is called 'Questioning Value' because its aim is, first and foremost, to critically examine and to raise questions about the current status of the humanities in capitalist times where profit seems to be the best indicator of value, instead of providing answers in what can only be described as a very complex ongoing debate. After all, the pressure to justify our own existence and our reliance on public funding sometimes keep us from subjecting our own claims of value to proper rhetorical and logical scrutiny. Or, as Small puts it, '[i]f the effect of the requirements for the humanities to justify their public value, or the terms in which they are permitted to do so, is to stifle their ability to ask the hard questions of their own intuitions of purpose and value then they really will be in trouble' (Small, 2013: 21). With this issue, we aim to open up the floor for further debate by providing a platform for graduate students from different disciplines to contribute to the conversation. This issue considers the value of the humanities as well as on 'value' as a topic of humanities inquiry. Hopefully, by encouraging interdisciplinary debates, it is itself of value.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This issue of *Junctions* engages with the issue of 'Value' in the humanities in four articles and three book reviews. The authors explore the contribution of policymakers (Barker) and literary works (Meinen, Yao and Herforth) to debates about value of the arts or interdisciplinarity; argue for the humanities as a space for questioning the conditions of thought itself (Boot); or illustrate the importance of understanding our socio-historical lineage for our awareness of the modern subject (Munn).

The first article, written by Job Boot and called 'The Humanities: Toward an Impracticable Thinking,' follows Maurice Blanchot's remarks on the teacher-student relationship in the history of philosophy and concludes that the teacher ought to render knowledge 'impracticable.' Boot describes a plurality of thinking, which moves beyond positions and toward propositions, and, following Blanchot, argues that 'what is proper to the humanities is not the production of any form of knowledge or value, but rather the very movement of thought itself prior to any conclusions or evaluations.'

Next, Sarah Barker's 'Policy Impact on Valuation of Arts: Consequences of the English Baccalaureate' presents several narratives that show the impact of an English policy initiative on wider social structures such as pedagogical practice, public discourse, and artistic spheres. Relying on policy reports and interviews with professionals to create a timeline of policy impact, she argues that the introduction of the English Baccalaureate was a key catalyst in changing the discourse on the valuation of arts subjects in academic and social structures, and that the legacy of policy decisions has altered 'the question of not only the value of arts, but the valuation of values.'

Lisanne Meinen, Kaixuan Yao, and Karlijn Herforth consider Richard Powers' literary work *The Overstory* (2018) and analyze how it contributes to debates on the value of interdisciplinary knowledge by exploring the boundaries between artistic representation and scientific fact. Their article, 'Reading Richard Powers's *The Overstory*: "Treeing" the Issue of Interdisciplinary Knowledge,' provides a reading of a literary text that engages with other fields and discourses of knowledge, narrativizing large-scale issues such as deforestation. By presenting the interdisciplinary thinking of the text's characters — a thinking *with* trees — they argue that literary texts can help answer epistemological questions and thereby contribute helpfully to knowledge production in the climate crisis.

Finally, in 'Subordinated to Oneself: The Switchboard Operator as Early Self Manager,' Luke Munn positions the telephone operator as an early self-manager and, thereby, as a precursor for the modern self-governing subject. Drawing upon workers' memoirs, academic histories, training manuals, and managerial rhetoric between 1890-1940, Munn argues that the telephone operator highlighted the limits of contemporary Taylorist rationalization and that self-managing operators anticipate later theories such as Michel Foucault's 'technologies of the self.' He thereby illustrates that the modern individual is not historically exceptional, but rather emerges from a socio-historical lineage.

These articles are complemented by three book reviews, each concerning a text that takes a different approach to the notion of 'value.' The subsequent result is a selection of reviews that provides a concrete look at some important recent work from within the humanities, highlighting the different ways in which we can consider the question of value, and what means for work in our disciplines to be valuable — questions that lie at the heart of this issue.

Joanna Mardal's review of *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology* (2018), published by the Museum of Modern Art confronts us with the critical questions that frame and motivate MOMA's choice to follow up their earlier anthology on the same region. She succinctly captures in her review both the sheer scope of the material included and why further focus on this area is valuable in our current political climate. With his review of David Harvey's *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (2017), Stratos Kladis brings our attention to a work that aims to

creatively capture the fundamentals of Marxist theory in an accessible manner, covering all three volumes of *Das Kapital* (1867) in the process. Although, as Kladis highlights, increasing accessibility leads to particular trade-offs in the analysis (in particular in the strength of the analogies), he concludes that the book remains lucid and interesting for those wishing to understand how we could look to Marx for a response to the contemporary state of affairs. Finally, Solange Manche's review of Bernard Stiegler's *The Neganthropocene* (2018), as edited and translated by Daniel Ross, excellently draws out the core questions and themes that motivate Stiegler's work and unite the array of concepts and traditions he draws upon, taking care to highlight both how this collection is characteristic of his thought as a whole, and how it reveals a significant shift towards questions of political economy (or 'the political') from his earlier work. Crucially, she outlines how Stiegler's call for the revaluation of value itself is central to the transformation of the Anthropocene into what he terms the 'Neganthropocene.'

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This issue would not have been possible without the work of our editorial team. The following people worked on this issue of *Junctions*: Irene Alcubilla Troughton, Lotte van den Eertwegh, Anneloek Scholten and Lieke Schrijvers (core editors); Dennis Jansen and Mark Whittle (book review editors); Max Casey, Ian Giacondo and Konstantinos Megapanos (copy editors); Mario Cunningham Matamoros (proofreader); Calum Hughes (web manager); and Brianne Davis (community manager).

We would also like to thank the Graduate School of the Humanities at Utrecht University for their financial support; our anonymous peer reviewers; the members of our founding advisory board; and the author of the cover image for this issue Elekes Andor.

Finally, we thank the authors for their thought-provoking contributions to the topic of 'Value.'

REFERENCES

- Andor, Elekes. 2017. 'Infláció – 1946 – augusztus' photograph, used with modification under the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 2.0 generic license, <https://flic.kr/p/RoJiNE>
- AHRC. 2017. 'The Impact of AHRC Research, April 2016-March 2017.' <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/the-impact-of-ahrc-research/2016-17/>
- Belfiore, Elena. 2015. "'Impact,' 'Value' and 'Bad Economics': Making Sense of the Problem of Value in the Arts and Humanities." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 14, no. 1: 95-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022214531503>
- Crossick, Geoffrey, and Patrycja Kaszynska. 2016. 'Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project.' AHRC. <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

- Department of Education. 2019. *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*. OGL. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report>
- During, Simon. 2014. 'Stop Defending the Humanities.' *Public Books* January 3, 2014. <https://www.publicbooks.org/stop-defending-the-humanities/>
- During, Simon. 2017. 'The Idea of the Humanities.' https://www.academia.edu/34926361/The_idea_of_the_humanities_2017_
- During, Simon. 2019. 'A Second Secularization: The Humanities and Society.' Paper presented at *What's the Point: Impact and the Future of the Humanities, Utrecht University, April 11-12*.
- Fazackerley, Anna. 2019. 'Universities Condemn "Catastrophic" Plan to Link Fees to Graduate Pay.' *The Guardian* June 11, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jun/11/universities-condemn-catastrophic-plan-link-fees-graduate-pay-augar>
- Morson, Gary Saul, and Morton Schapiro. 2018. *Cents and Sensibility: What Economics Can Learn from the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracies Need the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Small, Helen. 2013. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.