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Summary Article: **humanities**

From *The Dictionary of Human Geography*

Emerging in Europe during the Renaissance from medieval scholastic study of the seven liberal arts (i.e. the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, and the *trivium* of rhetoric, logic and grammar), the humanities today denotes both an approach to knowledge and a specific set of disciplines (see also humanism).

As an approach to knowledge, the humanities are (still) characterized by broadly hermeneutic or interpretive methods and work through cycles of criticism rather than the establishment of theory and scientific law (see law, scientific), although concepts, the rule of evidence and logical argument are vital to their practice. Expressions of this include privileging the monograph or essay rather than the research paper as the preferred style of scholarly communication, individual authorship, and the use of the footnote or endnote rather than the 'Harvard' referencing system, suggesting 'conversation' rather than progressive and cumulative advance of knowledge (Smith, J., 1992a). The humanities thus foreground the active role of the author in the construction of knowledge and understanding (Cosgrove and Domosh, 1993).

The humanities disciplines concern the study of distinctively human actions and works; for example history, philology (language, literature, linguistics), philosophy, theology and studies of Antiquity. The principal goals of the humanities are both active and contemplative: they were long regarded as fundamental to the educational preparation of rulers, but their success was gauged in part by the degree of self-knowledge and self-reflection they produced in the student (Grafton and Jardine, 1986). Geography, sometimes characterized as the 'eye' of history, as history in turn was proclaimed 'queen' of the humanities, has a long record as a humanities discipline, initially because it based its knowledge of the world upon the authority of ancient texts and subsequently, as exploration, autopsy and empiricism displaced such authority, because it entailed the comparative study of places and peoples.

The evolution of modern geography as a university discipline has been strongly affected by both natural science and social science epistemologies and methods, although historical geography's natural allegiance with history has continuously and contentiously sustained geography's connection with a key humanities discipline. The rhetoric of 'science' within geography has long tended to subordinate a broader humanities tradition, although recent studies of science as a social, irredeemably human practice have not only drawn in some measure from the humanities but also interrupted the authority of science understood as objectivism. The values and value of humanities scholarship have also been marginalized by geography's postwar focus on research, policy relevance and critique as opposed to pedagogy. A self-styled 'humanistic' geography in the 1970s and 1980s (Ley and Samuels, 1978) owed less to conventional humanities study than to then fashionable psychological theories and twentieth-century phenomenology, but it opened human geography to questions of perception and interpretation that had long been associated with the humanities (see humanistic geography). Probably the most productive and widely read contemporary practitioner of geography as a humanity is Yi-Fu Tuan, whose autobiography is explicit about his practice of geography as a vehicle for self-understanding through reflection on the true, the good and the beautiful in a world of places and landscapes (Tuan, 1999).

Many human geographers are profoundly sceptical of the universalistic claims of 'humanity' and the

humanities' focus on individual agency (both in subject matter and authorship), and indeed many contemporary scholars in the humanities have also sharply questioned such traditional orthodoxies (see post-structuralism). But recent critical and cultural study within human geography signals the discipline's engagement in the convergence of social sciences and humanities that has emerged with the rejection of positivism and the embrace of interpretive methods on the part of the former, and acceptance of the value of social theory on the part of the latter (see also Gregory, 1994). The 'cultural turn' has thus seen human geographers working with both materials and methods conventionally associated with the humanities – for example, the interpretation of texts and images – although the 'new' cultural geography represents an uneasy alliance between those pursuing a traditionally social science agenda and those who cleave to the more conventionally individualistic, reflective and pedagogical concerns of the humanities. Still, that the Association of American Geographers could convene a major interdisciplinary conference on 'Geography and the Humanities' in June 2007 says much about the salience of contemporary conversations between the two, appropriately enough, and hence about the continuing importance of the humanities in geography and geography to the humanities.

Suggested reading

Full bibliography is available here.

Tuan (1996).

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Cosgrove, D. (2009). humanities. In D. Gregory, *The dictionary of human geography* (5th ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/humanities>



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