

Reform and Crisis : Reflexions and Questions on the Condition of the Human and Social Sciences in South Africa and Beyond

Ernst Wolff

Abstract: This aim of this article is to contribute to the debates regarding the condition and reform of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). First, focussing on South Africa and the Humanities Charter in particular, the tensions and theoretical problems in this road map are explored through an analysis of three important themes: (1) the use of the word ‘Africa(n)’ in the Charter, (2) the articulation between basic and higher education and (3) the Charter’s catalytic projects. The analysis explores the risks posed by precipitate recommendations for intervention in the HSS. Second, taking a step back to reflect on theoretical issues involved in institutional reforms of the HSS, three central issues in the practice of the HSS are highlighted. Clarity on these issues is essential to undertake responsible HSS reform anywhere in the world. These issues are: (1) the nature of academic liberty, (2) the organic link between the HSS and other disciplines and (3) the capability of the HSS to produce crises. The detour via these fundamental questions is an indispensable part of an approach to reforms which would be prepared in continuity with the major theoretical concerns of these disciplines and that would thus remain true to the practice of these disciplines.

Keywords: academic liberty, crisis, higher education, Human and Social Sciences, Humanities Charter, research

Introduction

In the current debate on the state of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS)¹ – fuelled by the Academy of the Sciences of South Africa (ASSAf) report (2011a) and the Humanities Charter issued by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2011) – there is a broad consensus that urgent reforms need to be undertaken. According to some of the entrenched views, the major question is either whether we will lose another generation or two of students and researchers to the strategies applied by stubborn, outdated

institutions that undermine social transformation, or to the managerialist bureaucrats of grandiose projects (depending on the perspective). Whatever one's take on these two important documents may be, the issue of the state of the HSS in South Africa, and internationally, is not simple.

In this short article, I attempt neither to provide an overview of the debate, nor to formulate an encompassing view to arbitrate any of its thorny disputes, since both projects would exceed the limits of the article as much as the limits of my competence. Instead, the objective of this article is two-fold. Firstly, by focusing on the Humanities Charter as the current roadmap for action, a number of the tensions and theoretical problems in the Charter are highlighted through an analysis of three central themes:

- (1) the use of the word 'Africa(n)',
- (2) the articulation between basic and higher education, and
- (3) the Charter's catalytic projects.

The analysis illustrates the risk posed by precipitate recommendations for intervention in the HSS. Secondly, in response to this analysis, I propose three major Human and Social Scientific issues relating to the practice of the HSS, which need to be clarified as a precondition for undertaking responsible reform of the HSS in South Africa, or anywhere else. These issues are:

- (1) the nature of academic liberty,
- (2) the organic link between the HSS and other disciplines, and
- (3) the ability of the HSS to produce crises.

The detour via these fundamental questions is an indispensable part of an approach to reforms which would be prepared in continuity with the major theoretical concerns of these disciplines and that would thus remain true to the practice of these disciplines. Despite the patience that this long detour requires, it is not intended to deny or trivialise the urgency of such reforms.

A Reading of the Humanities Charter

In 2010, the South African Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, commissioned a report intended to underpin the establishment of 'a robust post-Apartheid Higher Education system' (DHET 2011: 5). The *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* published by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2011) is the response of Prof. Ari Sitas, Dr Sarah Mosoetsa and their task team to this request, focusing on the potential contribution of the HSS to such an education system, because, as the Minister suggests, 'the Humanities and the Social Sciences have or ought to have a major role in defining its character, its excellence and values' (DHET 2011: 5). Consequently, the task team identified the need for a 'vision' and an 'architecture' for the HSS (DHET 2011: 24).

Accordingly, the mandate of the task team was interpreted as follows:

... after a careful examination of the problems and needs in the fields concerned, the Charter should create a powerful, positive, affirmative statement on the humanities and social sciences; it should emphasise the role of the humanities in creating responsible, ethical citizens; it had to define a post-apartheid trajectory of scholarship sensitive to our immediate and long-term developmental needs as a key society in Africa and the 'Global South'; it had to be aspirational, but it should nevertheless serve as a clear road map for intervention with the means at our disposal. (DHET 2011: 24)

In working through the Charter in order to assess its success in fulfilling the task team's mandate,² one is struck by a number of regretful ambiguities. However, whereas these ambiguities will now be examined, let me not create the impression that there is a lack of excellent recommendations in the Charter. The long list of good examples include the revision of systems of merit, the rehabilitation of neglected forms of knowledge and competence, founding a national tutor system, reviewing the status of publications, advancing South-South collaboration, and improved financing of studies in the HSS. Each of these ideas has merit. However, I am primarily interested in what the general thrust of the Charter reveals.

In order to explore the Charter's thrust, I examine three questions:

- (1) What do the authors understand by the word 'African'?
- (2) What is the relevance of the relation between basic education and the level of excellence in higher education and research, as presented by the Charter?
- (3) How are the six catalytic projects proposed by the Charter to be evaluated?

'Africa', 'African'

In the preamble to the Charter, the desired outcome of its recommendations is presented by the imagined vision of a South African engineering student of 2030 (born in 2012) who will have had exposure to the humanities, and is well educated, culturally rooted and comfortable in a multi-cultural world. This student will especially be guided by an identity that is predominantly oriented not to the family or clan, the country or the world, not to the language, consumer, sport, political or personal project or whatever other possible identity formative concern that one may want to cherish³ – in other words, leading the kind of life one values and has reason to value, according to Sen's famous formula (1999: 18) – but to the continent, Africa.⁴ For the purposes of the argument in this article, I refer to this one-sided and narrow focus on Africa as the

beacon of identity, in combination with the particular importance attributed to the formation of identity as a task of the HSS, as the Charter's Africanism.

Setting aside the issue of whether the adjective 'African' is used with a racial innuendo,⁵ the obvious question is how the prominent plea for an 'African' perspective to the HSS has to be understood. One finds two answers to this question in the Charter: there are two ways in which the 'Africa' that 'has to be brought into the mainstream' (DHET 2011: 40) of the HSS is presented, which is suggestive of two corresponding ways in which to 'correct the performance trajectory' (DHET 2011: 17) of the HSS.⁶

Firstly, generally, 'Africa' is used in the Charter as an idealised notion of an entity which is characterised by a high degree of cultural purity and which is evoked in a manner predominantly oriented to the past. A number of points in the Charter reflect this usage of the term 'Africa(n)':

- (1) The vision of the fictional (non-HSS) student of 2030 in the preamble (especially DHET 2011: 12–13) has already been referred to above.
- (2) There is an exceptionally strong emphasis on history and historiography (focused on Africa) in the Charter. I certainly do not deny the importance of historiography, nor the strategic role it should play in de-marginalising certain forms of cultural expression, wisdom and research. What I would like to alert the reader of the Charter to is the disproportionate importance accorded to history and historiography in a Charter that claims to be for *all* of the HSS (see, for instance, the roles attributed to the HSS, DHET 2011: 14).
- (3) Africa is used as the guiding star of the six catalytic projects (see the discussion of this issue below).
- (4) A naive appeal is made to paleo-anthropological history as one of South Africa's strong points.⁷
- (5) It is interesting to note that a limit to this Africanism is implied, when the authors of the Charter refer to the debate about how to assess post-colonial studies: on the one hand, there are claimed to be some who consider this field to be at the forefront of the critique of modernity and imperialism; on the other hand, '[s]ome of the *harsher Africanists* saw post-colonial studies as the "thin end of the wedge for the recolonisation and marginalisation of Africa by the Western Academy"' (DHET 2011: 32, my emphasis). Whereas the issues at stake here deserve to be thought through very carefully, the point, for the purpose of my article, is that although the task team states that it decided not to choose sides in the debate, only one side of the debate is depicted as 'harsh' – the dissociation implied in this word is enforced by the fact that this is also the only occurrence of the label 'Africanist' in the Charter.

Second, next to this dominant view on 'Africa', there are also minor indications of another idea of 'Africa', namely as a more contemporary social, political phenomenon, where cultural practices are tied into relations of interaction

with other, foreign (non-African) practices, and where the different temporal dimensions each receive more balanced attention. An instance of this occurs in what is proposed in the introduction to and justification of what is called ‘an ambitious and extroverted African Renaissance Programme’ (DHET 2011: 19): the African Renaissance is described as an event in which thinkers break out of the framework imposed on Africa by the Berlin conference – they reflect on the past, present and future⁸ in a manner that ‘cannot occur in isolation from Africa’s key interactions with the rest of the world, as Africa has never been a bounded unit throughout ancient or more recent history, and therefore demands a deeply relational understanding of its emergence and consolidation’ (DHET 2011: 19). The point is not explicitly developed, but one can easily deduce what this means: the people for whom the Charter is written are taken up in intricate histories of exchange with people, artefacts and cultural expressions, the results of which are not affixed superficially onto an immutable African core, but continue to form and inform these people’s identities, thought and practices.

Everything is not so categorically presented in the Charter, but the salient traits of these two perspectives may be highlighted for the sake of the argument. To schematise: the one is essentialist, the other relational; the one works with an idealised vision of an African past that is to be rehabilitated, the other with a continual process of the formation and therefore the hybridisation of practices on the continent we live on; the first negates the second, the second undermines the first. These two perspectives simply cannot co-exist.

Articulation between Primary and Secondary Education and Tertiary Education and Research

I approach this issue in the conviction that the quality of primary and secondary education has a significant knock-on effect on the quality of tertiary education and then, in turn, on research.⁹ In focusing on this issue, I do not wish to suggest that this effect is the only factor responsible for a standard of higher education that is lower than would be desirable. Moreover, in one particular sense, that of lecturers’ pedagogical responsibility towards their students, I do not think that the low level of school education is essentially relevant to teaching at universities: a pedagogue should as far as possible adapt lectures pragmatically to the level of the students at the entry level.¹⁰ Nor do I wish to address the question of whether, under the current dispensation, good matriculation marks are a necessary condition for success in university studies. The issue I am concerned with is rather that the level of competence (as acquired at school) of the average student enrolled for HSS at university can reasonably be expected to have an impact on the level of competence that a (pedagogically responsible) lecturer can hope the student will be able to acquire in, say, three years of undergraduate study, and then, through a domino

effect, the standard that can realistically be expected in post-graduate study and research, that is the standard of the ultimate ‘outcome’ of the educational process at different exit levels.

The Charter’s response to such a conviction is clear: it suspects this concern of arising from judgement that is warped by privilege and racial thinking, by the practice of pop sociology and even from the desire to bar children from disadvantaged sectors of society from entry into advanced HSS studies (note that the combative terms used in this sentence are all derived from the Charter – cf. especially DHET 2011: 44). I counted seven places where the task team declined to deal with this issue, be it through engagement with the weakest opponents to their point of view, through the generous use of the *ad hominem* argument, or whatever other technique of evasion (see DHET 2011: 33 [two places], 43, 44 [three places], 49). The scope of the article does not allow for an exhaustive commentary on this aspect of the Charter, but I use the two points on page 33 to demonstrate my point:

What has been worrying is that on most occasions academics in the field have painted a picture of a ‘they’ that is devoid of any notion or culture of human rights. In this picture, the students are the bearers of an educational ‘deficit’ unsuited for further education, of a township culture that is anti-intellectual and of aspirations for mobility that are unrealistic: they can’t write, they can’t think and they are a waste of academic time and resources. (DHET 2011: 33)

The authors of the Charter clearly prefer to engage with the least able, and compromised, spokespersons of this concern,¹¹ a procedure that raises a number of questions: Why use the extreme ‘unsuited’ instead of acknowledging the diverse range of ‘suitabilities’ found among students? Why refer only to ‘township culture’, when those of us who have taught thousands of first-year students know the considerable difficulties faced by some students (many of which are white, if this is relevant at all!) even coming from schools with a good reputation? Why introduce the idea of an ‘anti-intellectual culture’ when the issue is, first and foremost, the basic skills of reading and writing – skills that are supposed to be taught at school – whatever the ambient culture(s) may look like? Why use emotive exaggerations such as ‘they can’t think’ (even if they are cited from interviewees), instead of a qualified description of the particular shortcomings that one may expect even from a new student with above-average matriculation results? Why articulate the economic reductionist’s take on the stakes of higher education, when there are so many frustrated, yes, but devoted lecturers who cannot see how education can be a waste of time?¹² Formulating one’s opponents’ point of view in the clumsiest and crassest way (through the use of the ‘straw man’ fallacy) does not amount to refuting that view – the issue expressed remains entirely valid, albeit in a crude form: school education is not up to standard and it has a significant impact on the standard of university education. But the Charter continues, a bit further down on the page:

This attitude of our homo academicus has to do with a severe South African black majority experience, but it refers to the ‘winners’, to those who have succeeded in having access. (DHET 2011: 33)

This inept spokesperson, whose entire concern can be reduced to a mere ‘attitude’, is presented as ignorant of the partiality of his attitude and thus the true meaning of this attitude has to be revealed to him: his opinion reflects a blindness to the losers of the national education system, and such a one-sidedness that unjustly loses sight of the black majority experience is by implication racist. Such a person deserves nothing less than to be ironically labelled ‘our homo academicus’. The Charter subsequently proposes the alternative:

It would be prudent to reflect on those ‘who do not make it there’ – those who never matriculated; those whose matriculation proscribed access; those who failed during their first year; those who failed to secure a degree; those who have been granted a degree with grades that proscribe further study; those who have been accepted into postgraduate programmes whose grades proscribe further postgraduate study; and those who lack the financial means or are constrained by economic imperatives that prevent or de-prioritise further study. A democratic system based on a culture of rights cannot be about terminal closures; it must be about how to keep a variety of doors of learning open to enhance talent whenever it is manifested after an initial failure. (DHET 2011: 33)

Instead of now correcting the compromised spokesperson’s view – or even better, confronting and addressing the valid point contained in it¹³ – the Charter changes the subject, from considering the effect of basic education on higher education to the question of exclusion and alternative admissions. To avoid confusion, let me state categorically that the matter of exclusion is of the highest importance, and the special attention given to it in the Charter should count among the major achievements of the task team.

Nevertheless, no matter what the rhetorical pathos with which the pressing matter of exclusion is presented here (note the eight-fold repetition of ‘those who...’), it does not detract from the fact that the issue of school education has been evaded, and the people who voiced this concern have been ‘they-ed’ in a way that the Charter itself condemns (DHET 2011: 33). Should one not conclude, then, that by refusing to recognise the importance of the transition from basic to higher education, the Charter implicitly claims that one of the major factors leading some ‘not making it there’, namely the poor quality of basic education which obstructs many talented young people’s access to higher education, has *no* effect on those who *do* make it into universities,¹⁴ or on the form of engagement that the universities can have with them?

Also, and in line with the concern about exclusion expressed in the Charter, how can one realistically hope that the universities would succeed in delivering a population of university graduates and post-graduates in HSS that would be representative of South African society, if the spread of achievements in the

matriculation exams is not? In fact, pointing out the tragedy of students who never even get the opportunity to enrol for university education, is not more urgent and less racist than identifying students' unpreparedness (as the Charter implies), rather, unpreparedness is an important factor of exclusion.

The Charter is absolutely right in stressing the importance of the first-year tertiary education in the entire HSS system. But this emphasis is legitimate, first and foremost, in a pragmatic sense, and must to a large extent be ascribed to the deficiencies of our current school system. Besides, this acknowledgment does not amount to the conclusion that '*the real crisis point* in our entire HSS system is at first-year level' (DHET 2011: 44, my emphasis). This conclusion is naive, since it proposes that anything can be forced into the machine of higher education in the HSS and (provided the Charter's recommendations for adapting the trajectory of the HSS are followed) doing so will still produce world-class students and researchers.

Even more bizarrely, this Charter, which rightly advocates the task of 'critically unravelling the heritage of authoritarianism, colonialism and the rule of race' (DHET 2011: 19) is silent about what remains today as a monstrous legacy of apartheid education. Why such a conspicuous vacuum should be accepted as part of the construction of a new system of higher education, of which the 'post-Apartheid character is indispensable', according to Minister Nzimande's Foreword (DHET 2011: 5), is incomprehensible.¹⁵

Instead of demonising those who express the dilemma of the poor (especially first-year) performance of students, in order to avoid the subject, the Charter would have done better to develop a policy for the advancement of the HSS from school level (as does ASSAf 2011a: 17, 134 [Recommendation 8]), since the schools are an integral part of the HSS system. The Charter even implies that this is not such an unacceptable idea, as can be demonstrated from the statement in the Preamble, where the authors attribute the acquisition of human scientific competence in their imagined 2030 engineering student to her having been taught by a new generation of teachers – but this, *at school* (DHET 2011: 12). What the Charter formulates as a vision for the future cannot be discarded as wisdom for today.

Catalytic Projects

The aim of the catalytic projects is to help people who suffer from a feeling of floating on the ocean of time and having to struggle through life without a past (or without a glorious past), by incorporating them into the mainstream of the history of humanity and by doing so redirecting the trajectory of the HSS to the transformation of identity, dignified participation in the world of knowledge and the ability to make a contribution to global concerns (terms derived from DHET 2011: 49, but see also pp. 20, 38). The catalytic projects should serve not only to realise this vision (DHET 2011: 17), but to redirect

the trajectory of the HSS in South Africa, and in this way to help accomplish the Charter's general objective to 'dynamise and invigorate the entire terrain of scholarship' (DHET 2011: 27). The catalytic projects can be summarised as follows (see DHET 2011: 20–1):

- (1) An interdisciplinary study of the history of southern Africa from the eleventh to the sixteenth century.
- (2) An exploration of the contribution that indigenous languages make or can make to the HSS in respect of the conceptual development of knowledge.
- (3) The recuperation of traditions of popular education and innovation of education.
- (4) The establishment of five 'Humanities hubs', described as 'not only centres of heritage but [...] also centres of ongoing research, documentation of know-hows, oral stories and poetry, knowledge production, student internship and education' (DHET 2011: 20–21, 39).
- (5) An exploration of the social sources of creativity.
- (6) The recovery of traditions of 'knowledge production' during the 1950s to the 1980s in order to bring them into the mainstream.

The virtual schools proposed by the Charter (cf. DHET 2011: 18, 28–29) will play a complementary role, since to each of them is assigned a theme, qualified as 'signpost areas of scholarship that are in need of nourishment' (DHET 2011: 29).

As far as I can see, all these projects could be considered good and important (with some reservations about the fourth, due to its vagueness): they are good, in as far as they point to significant research gaps; they are important, since they would address a legitimate academic-political issue, namely the marginal(ised) position of certain non-Western aspects of our South African intellectual heritage. Besides, if the academic mainstream stands for 'critical investigation' (unfortunately, nowhere is this always the case), then, bringing this heritage into the academic mainstream (DHET 2011: 40) would probably enrich our work in the HSS and expose this heritage to continued re-interpretation and critique, in ways that are relevant for our current context.

However, for a number of reasons, assessing the value of this part of the Charter's recommendations is a much more complex issue. I list four:

- (1) Can one reasonably expect that these projects would facilitate the realisation of the Charter's vision (whatever one may think of it) and do justice to the general mandate of the task team? Could one realistically expect that they would help in providing for other urgent needs, like the 'new corps of thinkers who can nurture socio-economic alternatives' (DHET 2011: 28)?
- (2) Related to the first point is the following: all of these projects are presented as catalytic, but they are *predominantly* catalytic for the incorporation of marginalised forms of competence and knowledge, only

indirectly for promoting the HSS as a whole, and *barely* for handling a long list of other pressing contemporary matters. Such a list can be abstracted from the Charter itself,¹⁶ still, these themes are all disqualified from catalytic potential (however, it should be acknowledged that the themes set aside for the virtual schools seem possibly to attenuate the importance of this point.)

- (3) If the dominant concern of the catalytic projects for the inclusion of marginal(ised) traditions is interpreted against the backdrop of the Charter's Africanism (in the narrower sense), one may wonder if the proposed transformation of the HSS would not run the risk of producing foreseeable harmful side-effects, for instance a partial takeover of the academic mainstream by political interests¹⁷ (on the potential ambiguities of transformation in Higher Education, see Kistner 2011) and thus, instead of enriching the HSS practice, narrowing it down by unacceptably¹⁸ instrumentalising it.
- (4) It seems possible that the one-sided focus of these projects would have a reductive effect in practice, not only because they represent a selection of themes, but because this selection will have to be funded. Is it unreasonable to fear that the South African scholar – student or researcher – will have relatively less support available to explore other themes? In short, there is a real risk that the one-sidedness of these projects will produce an unwanted side-effect: Africans will have to limit their vision increasingly to African studies, while other urgent issues are left to financially and institutionally poorly supported scholars.

In as far as the three points covered in this first section of the article are valid, it should be acknowledged that there are several major issues in the Charter that would need to be thought through more seriously. With all due sympathy for the mammoth task given to the task team and the practical constraints under which the task team had to work, the magnitude of the problems with the Charter makes one wonder about the prudence of drawing up a document with such high stakes 'under diabolical deadlines' (Sitas 2012). The matter of transforming the HSS is too serious to be addressed so hurriedly.

It would be foolish to undertake corrections or improvements on the themes studied above in the current context. Instead, in the second part of this article, I suggest three major questions to be worked on as part of an alternative approach and in preparation of any recommendations for reforms of the HSS.

Theoretical Preparation of Reforms of the HSS: Three Questions

If I make a plea for an initial theoretical detour as preparation for recommendations on the reform of the HSS, it is not to dismiss the thought that went into drawing up the Charter. But it does seem appropriate to treat the question of the condition of the HSS first of all as an HSS matter. This requires patience

in order to work through the underlying theoretical problems. True enough, these problems cannot be solved, but a Charter for the HSS needs to give account of and provide a justification for the underlying theoretical assumptions it works with. The present article can be nothing more than a brief outline of three of the important questions that could be considered decisive for understanding what it means to tinker with these disciplines. Although these three questions roughly fit the three aspects of the Charter discussed above, they are intended rather as general themes for preparatory contemplation, rather than as the way to a corrective to each of the three themes.

How Much Freedom Is Good for the HSS?

Probably no reader of this article would dispute that teaching and research in the HSS should be free from (crude, direct) political interventions (or ideological impositions from industry) and that teaching and research should be supported by the availability of basic material requirements. The question is rather to know to what extent the nature and potential of social scientific teaching and research are compromised when it is subjected to the requirement of specific utilities.¹⁹ Some of the key conflicting concerns that make up this question are reflected in two important articles in the *Mail & Guardian* – one by Paula Ensor, one by Ari Sitas.

In ‘Whose “way forward” for the humanities is it anyway?’, Ensor (2012) expresses anxiety about the ‘imposition of top-down agenda’ and asks if one should ‘hand over the future of the humanities and social sciences to regulation by a government ministry’ or, one may add, by university authorities. She appreciates the Minister’s call for breaking ‘the hegemony of ideologies that primarily serve the interests of capital’.²⁰ However, she is careful to express these symptoms of the instrumentalisation of the HSS in extreme terms, by denouncing the ‘hegemonic ideas’ and what is ‘*overly* bureaucratic’ (my emphasis) – by so doing, she leaves open the possibility of a mid-way, of moderate instrumentalisation.

If the condemnation of subjecting the HSS to the interests of ‘capital’ or ‘government’ can justifiably be expressed in such exaggerated terms, the field of tension in which the question of academic freedom has to be settled can be traced by expressing the opposite extreme: just as I am not convinced that there is an invisible hand that miraculously ensures that economic advantage of ambitious individual market players works through to beneficial outcomes for society, I am not convinced that there is an invisible hand that will miraculously combine the research of free individual social scientists to an concerted devotion to social issues in a manner that would be to the maximum benefit of society. Between these two extremes lies the question of the coordination of freedom and planning, openness and institutionalisation, discovery and problem-solving, insight for its own sake and public accountability.²¹

A promising avenue to explore in view of formulating an idea of what dimensions ‘academic freedom’ should take is to work on the questions of ‘whose freedom?’ or ‘freedom of what?’. Often liberty from intervention, constraints and instrumentalisation is claimed for every researcher and lecturer of the HSS. However, such claims neglect

- (1) the social conditions required for top class research/teaching – although there are individual researchers who make original contributions to their field, their work always depends on the painstaking labour of less free practitioners (for example, writing subject dictionaries, editing journals, copy editing, preparing critical editions of classics, translating, search reading, having a heavier teaching load²²) and often on the good functioning of discipline fraternities (after all, what would a researcher be without access to reference works, published research from colleagues over the world, etc.); from this point of view, the sustained ‘performance’ of a discipline could be argued to depend on the freedom of the discipline in general (rather than that of each individual collaborator), which requires sound institutional planning and administration;
- (2) the varieties of function of practitioners in the HSS – one should consider the fact that HSS are taught at so-called research universities, but also at universities of technology; this fact represents the fundamental reality of divergent forms of specialisation that are all part of the practice of the HSS, even if not all are top-level research (think of copy editors, translators, surveyors, primary school teachers, etc. and, depending on the institutional arrangements, also very practical, goal-oriented activities, such as the organisation of libraries, rehabilitation of speech impairments, managing tourism and hospitality industries, web-design, etc.);
- (3) recognition for social accountability – at least in as far as scientists in the HSS are employed by the State, citizens may be considered to have a legitimate claim to accountability regarding the ways in which HSS deliver on recognisable goods – which does not mean measurable outcomes in five-year-plan frameworks; the humanities may probably be allowed to answer for themselves in terms appropriate to the humanities, but still, in terms that are clear enough and demonstrable enough to convince the citizenry in the long run.

The point is: freedom of teaching and research is institutionally and politically embedded and can therefore be considered not as a sufficient, but only as a necessary, condition for providing society with the benefits offered by the HSS. This means that government has the duty to promote the well-being of the institutions of teaching and research, and stimulate (if not commission) work on certain areas and issues that can be demonstrated to be of social importance. Since a reform policy of the HSS is rooted in this eminently human/social scientific question, any preparation for the reform of the HSS in South Africa would at least have to justify its position on this issue.

Whereas the considerations above do allow for political intervention, this does not mean that one has to adopt the voluntarism occasionally expressed in Ari Sitas's (2012) article 'Way forward for the humanities'. Admittedly, this article comments on a policy document which is aimed at political action. However, if one looks at claims such as that 'a new era is upon us – excellence and creativity in these fields will be supported', that the 'consequence of all this is a framework for the humanities and social sciences that breaks with the past', that the series of new initiatives 'will be given life', that 'we have to be proactive and transform the conditions that allow for the production of knowledge' and at the conclusion: 'So expect action rather than talk, creative projects rather than meetings and some serious but humble resources [sic]', one may rightfully ask if Sitas (and the grandiose catalytic and institutional projects of the Charter) do not disregard a major social theoretical insight regarding the limited extent to which human action can be planned. When advocating and planning interventions, should one not first get a clear view on the question of whether human agents and the collective practices of HSS are entities of such a nature that they will let themselves be steered or forced by massive, sudden interventions of planning in a satisfactorily predictable way?²³ Answering 'no' to this question does not necessarily amount to an apology for the status quo; it does hint at the need for an initial conceptual and theoretical orientation to proposals for reform.

What Are the HSS?

This question could be taken in a more essential sense (what are the defining characteristics of HSS?) or in a more practical sense (which disciplines count as HSS disciplines and of what do these practices consist?). My reflections adopt the perspective implied by this second, more practical, sense.

The Charter contributes little more to this issue than a couple of implied or undeveloped ideas.²⁴ Obviously, the HSS are practised in more than just one faculty on our campuses; there is nothing audacious in requiring that Education, Law and Theology should be encompassed in all reflection on the HSS. Besides these families of disciplines, I find it difficult to see how one can avoid counting Economics among the HSS. This is not to deny that each set of disciplines has its own problem profile – think for instance of the difficult tension between the university disciplines of Christian theology and the disturbing militancy of fundamentalism (an area of contestation that Economics does not have to face in this country), or of the question about their relevance that classical languages may have to deal with and which is not faced (in the same way) in Law or Education. In particular, it is hard to defend any claim that Economics should be exempt from what the Charter calls 'bringing them into the main stream' – for example, promoting students' and researchers' understanding of the competence of agents in the informal economy (see the

approaches of Dasgupta 2007 and Hann and Hart 2010) – and to give Economics at least sufficient means for thinking in alternative ways about its own history, about political economy and about the interface between citizenship and the economy (see, for example, Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010).

The human and social component forms an obvious, indispensable aspect of numerous other disciplines: the medical sciences, architecture and urban design,²⁵ and some aspects of engineering, geography, agriculture, information systems are inconceivable without due regard for the ‘human factor’ (cf. Dejours 2010). In each of these cases, this human component cannot be given account of properly by non- or other than human scientific forms of interrogation. This is even without considering the professional ethical dimension of all disciplines or some of the most advanced epistemological issues.²⁶ And yet, often, the HSS are presented in a false schematisation: not as permeating other sciences, but as neatly separate from them.²⁷ In this way, thinking about the human aspects is outsourced from these ‘non-human scientific disciplines’ to the HSS disciplines and the neglect of the human and social scientific dimension of other disciplines is seemingly justified (not least by institutional specialisation), and thus these ‘non-human sciences’ subject themselves to a narrow instrumentalising logic. In return, these disciplines are artificially immunised from the crises of the humanities – an immunisation which is in reality nothing but a repression of the fact that this neglect continues to infect these disciplines.

Obviously these ‘non-human sciences’ do not have the same problem profile as the HSS (for example, regarding the issue of funding), but the point I wish to make is that the weak position of the humanities plus institutional specialisation is to the detriment of ‘non-human sciences’ too. If this neglect of the issue of the human in other disciplines were to be suspended – as it should be – a major dimension of the crisis of the HSS would be revealed: the effects of a number of key aspects of the crisis of the HSS (the low average level of literacy of first-year students, funding, institutional profile, recognition, etc.) extend into all faculties of the university; in fact, it is a crisis of the university and advanced research as such.

Are the HSS only Succumbing to Crises or Do They also Cause Crises?

It has become customary to lament the ‘crisis of the humanities’ and to portray this crisis as something that *happens to* the HSS. I oppose this lament not because I deny its validity (the evidence is easy to muster), but because it is hopelessly insufficient. Far too little is said about the HSS as *recorders, amplifiers and creators of crises*, or of crisis as a major *capability* of the HSS.²⁸ And this is perhaps an even more fundamental question than the crises suffered by the HSS.

What I have in mind is something like Heidegger's insight that '[t]he level of excellence of a science is determined by the extent to which it is *capable* of handling a crisis in its basic concepts' (Heidegger [1927] 1993: 9, my translation). For a hundred, even two hundred years and more, Human and Social Scientists have put their capability to handle crises in their basic concepts under severe test. And these crises in basic concepts undermine the HSS's potential to affirm themselves, since they undermine the sources of their authority. A few examples suffice to illustrate the point:

- (1) Instead of disposing over a religious or rational normative foundation *by which the value or utility of HSS could be easily demonstrated*, many scientists in these disciplines acknowledge that they live after the death of God (in Nietzsche's sense, see Van Tongeren 2000: 274–89), with the result that they are subject to the same disorienting consequences of polytheism (in the sense of Weber 1991) as the general inhabitant of the modern world.
- (2) If 'man' has lost his place in the centre of the cosmos and as an exception to the animal kingdom, psychoanalysis and a myriad of related forms of thinking have, additionally, dismantled the notion of 'man being master in his own home' (cf. Freud 1917).
- (3) If there was a time when the humanities were considered to civilise and liberate people – generally *the mission was not questioned* – these stories of redemption have come to be regarded with suspicion, according to another report on HSS (amongst others), that of J-F. Lyotard (1979).
- (4) Nowhere is this fatal playing with central concepts as clear as in the 'ends' of the post-Second World War decades: the end of man, the end of the West, the end of metaphysics, the end of culture, the end of literature, the end of the subject, the end of art, etc.²⁹
- (5) A generation later, the HSS tended to be less eschatological and more strategic: to avoid the end, we swerve. Hence the 'turns' – after the linguistic turn came the cultural turns: the interpretive turn, the performative turn, the reflexive/literary turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the spatial turn, the iconic turn (Bachmann-Medick 2006), or perhaps even a humanist turn (Kozlarek 2011), a technological turn (Armand and Bradley 2006) or a religious turn (Kirchhofer 2009; Weidner 2010) – all signs of the vibrancy, but also of the confusion in the humanities. The pleas for all kinds of post-, trans- and interdisciplinarity may be interpreted as as many responses to this situation.

This list could very easily be expanded, its references diversified. Certainly none of these tendencies may be accepted without critique; nor should the powerful responses to them be left out of count. However, just as Biko ([1978] 2004: 101–2), in the context of political resistance, had to deal with the insight that 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed',³⁰ so any person who works in the HSS or is charged with recom-

mending reforms to the way they are practised has to work through the difficult studies – fruits of human and social sciences! – according to which the minds of the scientist and the glorious traditions of science (as well as the critique thereof) may well be instruments of oppression and self-deception. Likewise, just as there is no consolation for the oppressed that by some historical determinism, somewhere in the future, they will liberate themselves (and their oppressors) of this infiltration of their minds (as the Charter’s task team clearly realises), so it would be rash to see only the creativity of these developments in the HSS or to consider the kind of events alluded to as the soon-to-pass discomfort of a paradigm shift. Instead, one does well to contemplate Peter Gay’s observation regarding the playful ironists of the Enlightenment: since their ‘claim for the omniscience of criticism’ was the ‘political demand for the right to question everything, rather than the assertion that all could be known or mastered by rationality’, their free rejection of the ambient Christianity imposed ‘burdens of guilt, of uncertainty, of sheer fright at the *uncharted territory before them*’ (Gay [1966] 1995: 140, 60, my emphasis). Similarly, the seriousness with which the mad man in Nietzsche’s famous aphorism 125 in the *Gay Science* exclaims on the disorientation of ‘whipping out the horizon’ or the ‘detachment of the earth from of its bond with the sun’ (cf. Nietzsche 1999: 480–2) is neither mere fiction, nor inappropriate anxiety, but records the destabilising uncertainty that accompanies the work of the modern HSS.³¹ Modernity itself could be considered to a certain extent as the painful experience of a condition of non-transcendable crisis, as Revault d’Alonnes (2012) argues – and this is in part a condition of the HSS that the HSS have created themselves.³² The HSS have an enormous capability to generate crises and the creativity demonstrated in this way has to be acknowledged. However, the sometimes paralysing and disorienting consequences of crises that are not mastered should not be ignored. Any reflection on the state of the HSS and on the practice of the HSS should take this fact into account.

ERNST WOLFF is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. After completing his doctorate in philosophy at the Sorbonne (2004), Ernst Wolff took a position at the University of Pretoria in 2005. At the same time, from 2007 to 2012 he worked as a fellow Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen (Germany) and he made regular visits to other institutions as visiting researcher (Radboud University of Nijmegen, Ecoles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales). His teaching and research are to be situated on the intersection of phenomenology, social and political philosophy and social theory; his work is devoted to questions of individual and collective agency, responsibility and technology. Wolff’s research is published in a number of books and scientific journals and he presents his ideas regularly at conferences in South Africa and abroad.

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Notes

1. The important question about differentiating between the Humanities and the Social Sciences in the current context is not addressed in the present article.
2. I take note of ASSAf's detailed response to the Charter (ASSAf 2011b) and recommend it to the reader. However, my reading of the Charter is of a different nature and overlaps with the ASSAf commentary only tangentially.
3. A number of these intricate links between identity projects and studies in the Social Sciences are traced by Kapp and Bangeni (2011).
4. My point is obviously not to deny that 'being African' can be a legitimate formative concern among others, but to highlight the one-sidedness with which this fact is singled out in the Charter's preamble.
5. See at least one example: the Charter refers to a group of people in South Africa during the years of apartheid as the 'black and African majority' (DHET 2011: 13). From the context it is clear that these "Africans" could not be white people. As far as my knowledge of apartheid racist phraseology stretches, 'black' and 'African' were used as synonyms. Since it would be odd to use the term "African" to designate the groups of "Indians/Asians" and "Coloureds" together, who should these Africans be considered to be? It seems thus more plausible to understand the phrase not to refer to a particular racial group, but to use "black" and "African" as mutually descriptive (but still excluding white people). Therefore, when the term "African" is then used elsewhere in the Charter without qualification, one may wonder if the equivalence between black and African has been suspended, or implicitly continued (see for instance the resonance with Minister Nzimande's use of the expression 'black people, particularly Africans' in the Foreword) (DHET 2011: 5).
6. My objective here is not to settle the issue of the Africanness of South Africa's HSS, but to point out an unresolved internal tension in the Charter. From a myriad of texts that are relevant to the issue of Africanness, I would like to draw attention to the debate on African particularity versus general humanity in the essays of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) and Elísio Macamo (2009).
7. South Africa 'has the traces of the first human footprints on earth, which can speak to the rest of the world of a heritage way back in the mists of time' (DHET 2011: 25).
8. However, notice the telling shift to an emphasis on the past in the following remark: 'To rise to the challenge we decided to become bolder and start drafting a set of recommendations that we thought, and still think, go a long way towards redressing the *past*, deal with the *present* and prefigure a system that can make a serious contribution to the pedagogy, research and scholarship of the *future*. Yet if the apartheid *past* is a harsh weight on the shoulders of the living ...' (DHET 2011: 24, my emphasis).

9. This is in line with the argument of Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007: 31), who state categorically that ‘poor schooling’ (and insufficient funding) ‘have a major bearing on student performance in higher education’. They also detail the impact of the low level of basic education on matriculation examination standards, which in turn would have an effect on the level at which lecturers can start to engage with students.
10. This is why I accept the strategic approach for the medium term of Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007), suspending my judgement on the content thereof.
11. And this despite the fact that the task team distinguishes between views of different quality: ‘There have been many nuanced accounts in our fact-finding visits about the need to correlate ability and performance with class, race, language and gender variables. Such an understanding of the challenges was found to coexist with a common-sense culture based on a pop sociology which is rather racialised [...]’ (DHET 2011: 44).
12. The Charter’s formulation of this issue is, strangely enough, much cruder than the example of a person expressing such a view as cited just afterwards in the text.
13. What the task team calls a ‘perceived unpreparedness of the majority of students’ (DHET 2011: 44), Nan Yeld described as ‘a chilling picture of the very low levels of preparation in incoming students to South African higher education institutions’ (cited in Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007: 37).
14. See, for instance, Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007: 34–7) on the lowering of examination standards in English, which gives a less prepared student access to university.
15. Besides, if South Africa can indeed boast ‘a revolutionary heritage of radical equality and freedom which, since 1994, has had the opportunity of consigning racism and manifold forms of derogation, exclusion and domination to a regrettable historical past’ (DHET 2011: 25), it is puzzling why the Minister is still looking specifically for a ‘post-Apartheid’ system of higher education and not just an improved one.

The Charter’s lack of engagement with the seventeen years of post-Apartheid policy-making and implementation preceding the Charter cannot be covered here. What is written in this regard on pp. 25–6 of the Charter represents only a very narrow view on the issue. The essence of the Charter’s view can be captured in two citations: ‘What is true, though, is that many decisions to squeeze the HSS over funding were justified in terms of the priorities of national policy’ (DHET 2011: 26), and ‘[i]t is a cruel fact that in the last 15 years the Humanities and the Social Sciences have been severely affected by the dire need to respond to the obvious deficit in engineering, natural scientific, informational and managerial needs’ (Project brief, DHET 2011, 68). Although it is conceded in the Charter that South Africa ‘has one of the weakest basic education systems on the African continent’ (DHET 2011: 25), matters such as absenteeism, malnutrition, the difficulties of second- or third-language education, the delivery of educational material, construction of facilities, transport, continued education of teachers, lowering of examination standards, and many others, are not thematised.

16. See the relation between urban and rural areas, the conditions of informal urban dwelling, energy, being green, the relation to other sentient beings, epidemics, bureaucracy, ‘digital, genetic and eco-centric scientific revolutions, with unfathomable implications for human communication, performance and ritual, for the production, circulation and consumption of goods and the reproduction of the species’, equity in the distribution of symbolic and material goods, gender justice, intercultural competence (DHET 2011: 24).

Or: ‘South Africa also has four clear domains of entropy and possible fragmentation: it has one of the most dangerous patterns of life chance and income inequality in the world, a pattern threaded through with race and gender overtones; it has demonstrated some of the most extreme forms of violence against and abuse of women and children in the most intimate spaces of sociality; it has one of the weakest basic education systems on the African continent and high rates of youth unemployment, with volatile gang and gang-related cultural formations; and finally, its elites, predominantly white and increasingly black, are prone to predation and demonstrate an alarming lack of social responsibility’ (DHET 2011: 25).

17. Without attributing any political agenda to the task team, one cannot but be astounded by the fact that the Mbekian politico-cultural notion of an ‘African Renaissance’ is introduced by fallacious reasoning (cf. DHET 2011: 13) and used *without any justification*.
18. ‘Unacceptably’ since I am not convinced that all forms of instrumentalisation of the HSS should be prohibited – see the subsequent section entitled ‘How Much Freedom Is Good for the HSS?’.
19. One finds a valuable overview of this dilemma from the point of view of ‘institutional culture’ and ‘new managerialism’ in Higgins (2007, especially §4.2), which overlaps somewhat with my short presentation.
20. In less political terms, this idea is also formulated in the Charter (DHET 2011: 25–6).
21. These are just as many manifestations of what is schematically presented as the tension between instrumental rationality and goal rationality; apart from the classics by Weber (1991), Habermas ([1981] 1995: 171–293) and others, see Rohbeck (1993), Tabachnik (2004) and Schechter (2010).
22. This is, evidently, without denying the competence needed for these tasks. A classic example would be the (admittedly questionable) German system of *Privatdozenten* – a virtual army of very competent academic labourers, who provide indispensable support for the remarkable work that we know from many German professors.
23. More practically, see the objections regarding the realisability of a number of the Charter’s proposals in the ASSAf commentary (2011b).
24. The ASSAf report (2011a) fares better, but is still far from doing what is suggested here.
25. At some institutions, these disciplines are housed in Faculties of Humanities.
26. See also the study of the human constitution of the sciences – Nola (2008) is a useful overview and reference.
27. Again, see the classic reference: Snow ([1959] 1961).
28. As far as crises are recorded and generated by HSS, these crises derive from acts of critique. One would obviously have to work here on the relation between crisis and critique, but space prohibits me from doing so. An insightful recent presentation of the divergent nuances of critique is given by Boltanski (2011).
29. See already Derrida’s (1982) reflection on the ‘ends’ in his famous paper ‘Of an apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy’.
30. This may be an adaptation of a similar insight by Fanon; see Biko ([1978] 2004: 75–6).
31. See, for instance, Tugendhat’s (1992: 371) observation: ‘The only appropriate way to respond to the *lack of results delivered by moral philosophy* thus far, can be to give as concrete as possible an account of the difficulties that stand in the way of simple solutions’ (my translation and emphasis).
32. These remarks come from a more Western perspective. However, the South African context for which I write cannot escape this fate; in fact, our context would rather tend to amplify the crises generated by the HSS.

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