A Passion for the Humanities

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It is an honour and a delight to write on behalf of my dear friend and distinguished colleague Professor Hiltraud Casper-Hehne and to celebrate her high academic achievements and the overall contribution she has made to the excellence and well-being of the academic community.

I met Hiltraud relatively late in my career, around 2019, in an international network of exchanges about the role of the Humanities in the contemporary university. Professor Casper-Hehne was well-known for her research on the "Interculture" project of the European Commission and for her long-standing collaborative work on higher education in Asia, notably within the German-Chinese Institute for Intercultural German Studies and Comparative Culture, which she founded. As a matter of fact, she was introduced to me by a common Chinese colleague, Professor Ping-chen Hsiung, with whom at the time I was serving as Board member of the international Consortium of Humanities Institutes and Centres (CHCI), based in the USA. Given that at the time, Hiltraud was also a senate member and vice president of the University of Göttingen, she was an extremely important contact for these international networks. I liked her immediately.

The project we developed together soon after meeting, which established our academic connection for years to come, was rather ambitious: we coordinated the European section of a World Humanities Report, commissioned by the Conseil International de Philosophie et Sciences Humaines (CIPHS) and UNESCO, in cooperation with the Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI).

The project was launched at a symposium on "Positioning the Humanities in the 20th century", hosted by the Volkswagen Foundation in Hannover, in Septem-

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ber 2019, with all the partners and stake-holders and supporting institutions in attendance. It was a very exciting and intellectually lively event, where different visions emerged about the future of the field.

Then Hiltraud and the team skilfully drafted a successful application for funding with the very supportive Volkswagen Foundation Grant. That grant allowed us to establish a Regional Research Team in Europe, to secure our contribution to the World Humanities Report. While keeping close ties with our partners in the USA and Asia, we set up a new network with the University of Belgrade, University College London, the University of Bologna and of Utrecht.

The European Humanities report research group set to work immediately with great zeal, and I developed a fantastic working relationship with Hiltraud – we understood each other at once and truly believed in what we were doing. The Volkswagen Foundation Grant had envisaged a dense programme of seminars and research meetings, which were supposed to rotate among the different partners. We were all looking forward to it, but then the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and we were all grounded. It was a shock for everybody.

It is well known, as the saying goes, that when things get tough, the tough get going – and it was indeed in the midst of the Covid crisis that Hiltraud displayed the qualities of leadership that we all admire in her. She recommended that we simply transferred online our calendar of scheduled meetings and symposia and kept to the funded schedule without delays or even the slightest hesitation. Amidst the anxiety, the mourning, and the despair of those long months of lockdown, our European Humanities Report project kept us all going.

In that period, throughout 2020, we held regular monthly meetings online of European Research Group online to discuss project development. Without ever leaving our homes, we "met" in Belgrade, Utrecht, Paris, Gottingen, London, and Bologna, making significant progress on our research. Hiltraud had a smile and a kind word online for everybody and kept the team going. I believe that many of us still miss those meetings today that life has gone back to 'normal'.

The academic year 2020–2021 saw our group co-chairing the European Humanities Conference, organized by UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences Programme, CIPSH (Conseil International de Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines) and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The president of the conference was Luiz Oosterbeek. The Conference was held during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, officially in Lisbon, in May 2021, but de facto online.

The research group led by Hiltraud and me presented our work at the Conference and signed the 2021 Lisbon Declaration on the future of the Humanities.[1] We were also actively involved in editing the Acts of that major event.[2]

[1] https://www.echic.org/files/2022/03/Lisbon-Declaration_EHC_2021.pdf.

[2] https://www.uc.pt/site/assets/files/1089570/livro_digital_interativo_arkeos_56.pdf.

Looking back to those intense – and painful – months of lockdown, it is truly incredible how our group, with Hiltraud in Gottingen as the leading figure, managed not only to work on, but to actually enjoy ourselves. The experience created for me an extremely strong bond of trust and friendship with Hiltraud, which will stay with me for life. As the epidemic faded and we resumed work in person again, I visited Gottingen many times, of course, and enjoyed live conversations and great hospitality.

I was proud and honoured that this successful cooperation also resulted in the award, in 2021–2022, of a Humboldt Research Award (von Humboldt Forschungspreis) for Lifelong Achievements in research and teaching. This great honour for me was sponsored by the University of Gottingen, and more specifically by Hiltraud Casper-Hehne. We popped the champagne bottle together when we heard the great news!

And our cooperation yielded even more results than we had hoped for: Hiltraud and I contributed several entries to the "Handbook of the Anthropocene. Humans between Heritage and Future", edited by Nathanaël Wallenhorst and Christoph Wulf for Springer Nature in 2023. But the biggest achievement was also the slowest in coming out: after working extremely hard in 2021–2022 to systematise the research one in the Covid years, we co-edited (also with Marjan Ivkovic and Daan F. Oostveen) "The Edinburgh Companion to the New European Humanities", which was co-edited by Edinburgh University Press in 2024. At 443 pages, with a broad range of international contributors, it is a massive and comprehensive contribution to the understanding of contemporary Humanities. We are all immensely proud of it.

The research group that carried out the Humanities Report and turned it into such an important publication has now accomplished its mission. But we are still in touch because we also constituted the core of the European Humanities in the Twenty-first Century Network, which is hosted by the University of Gottingen.[3] Hiltraud and I therefore continue to cooperate and develop projects. We believe that the future of the Humanities now rests on our ability to meet the societal challenges of today – and to combine tradition with the rise of new trans-disciplinary programmes, for instance on the Digital and Environmental Humanities. We share Hiltraud's belief that the Humanities can and will succeed in meeting these challenges.

It is a rare honour for me to share with dear Hiltraud such profound faith in the university as a pillar of democratic governance and free critical thinking. These values are more important than ever in the contemporary world. I also share with Hiltraud a profound commitment to the European project of peace and cooperation and hope to be able to continue to contribute to it in the years to come.

I think the university of Gottingen is fortunate to count among its staff such a remarkable, brilliant, jovial, collegial, and convivial person as Hiltraud.

[3] https://neh21.net/. All links last checked on 13 May 2025.

And I, who am lucky enough to consider myself as one of her friends, hope to continue to enjoy this privilege for years to come.

Forever in friendship,

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