Public Humanities (2026), 2, e168, 1–6
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10275

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Pitching the Humanities, in a Lower Key

Robert Buch

Comparative Literature, Martin-Luther-Universitat Halle-Wittenberg, Germany
Email: robert.buch@germanistik.uni-halle.de

(Received 31 May 2026 UTC; revised 18 August 2026 UTC; accepted 20 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

This article examines the two rationales most frequently invoked in the defense of the humanities: the practical skills they teach (preparing graduates for a wide range of jobs), and the civic-mindedness they instill (preparing students for active and responsible citizenship). As desirable as these aims may be, the article juxtaposes them with a more viable account of what the humanities accomplish suggested by Stefan Collini. It describes what the humanities do as an open-ended process of understanding instances of human meaning-making that affords a kind of gratification that cannot be quantified. Arguably, this redescription will not fix the institutional challenges faced by today's academic humanities. It does point the way, however, to a more promising, less defensive future, in the form of public humanities, countering the diminished status of the scholarly-academic humanities by expanding into new venues and engaging with new publics.

Keywords: *artes liberales*; crisis; humanities; liberal arts; public humanities

In their remarkable study of the humanities, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon portray a field in permanent crisis.[1] They argue that this crisis has afflicted the humanities since their inception in the late nineteenth-century German university and in subsequent adaptation and development in the United States. On Reitter and Wellmon's account, this crisis is a result of an ambivalent legacy—tied to the creative arts on the one hand, aspiring to match the rigor of the sciences on the other. This crisis of legitimacy, stemming from uncertain foundations and less apparent aims, has also been a resource for mobilizing the humanities and endowing them with a sense of purpose. In the disenchanted age in which the book's subtitle situates the humanities, some advocates see them as nothing less than an antidote to the vicissitudes of modernity, the reign of technology and capitalism under which we live.

One line of defending the humanities is vocational promise.[2] Unlike their reputation for not yielding practical skills, humanities subjects in this view develop useful skills and foster supple and adaptable minds. The humanities would thus be instrumental in producing the graduates needed in a business and technology environment that touts mental and intellectual flexibility and creativity as key to professional success. Yet this strategy is often pertinent only for a segment of the humanities disciplines, in particular the ones that

[1] Reitter and Wellmon 2021.
[2] For a spirited intervention along these lines see Kindt 2025.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intersect with the social science disciplines. It's a pitch that misses something fundamental about the humanities by assimilating them too quickly to the social sciences on the one hand, and by submitting them too unequivocally to the expectations of "job readiness" on the other. The critical thinking often claimed to be the distinctive skill taught in the humanities is by no means the prerogative or privilege of any one discipline, as John Guillory has pointed out.[3]

Another line of defense is more idealist and civic-minded, arguing that the humanities foster engaged and informed citizens, subjects capable of participating in debate, forming their own judgments, resistant to demagoguery, and amenable to being persuaded by reason and expertise. But as Reitter and Wellmon point out, the nexus between an education in the humanities and active and responsible citizenship is by no means a given.[4] If it were, it would be the strongest reason for making the humanities integral to higher education. In the United States, this view accounts for the longstanding prominence of the liberal arts in college education, but lately it has become subject to centrifugal forces and its survival is in question—as evident in the astonishing cutbacks to language and literature programs implemented, of all places, at the University of Chicago.[5]

Both defenses, the pragmatic and the idealist, skip the fact that if one seeks to gauge the value of the humanities in terms of outcomes and benefits they afford, one should not expect these effects to be too obvious and immediate. Study of the humanities disciplines *may* yield results such as job readiness and civic-mindedness, but they are by no means guaranteed. Descending from the *artes liberales*, the humanities were precisely not geared toward vocational qualification nor necessarily toward achieving political maturity but rather without any immediate practical ends. The training in rhetoric, history, and literature of which the modern academic humanities are the heirs was integral to the aspiring civil servants ethos, inducting him into the ranks of the high-minded administrators of the ancient *res publica.* But it is precisely the unmistakable elitist outlook of this inheritance that has made this educational ideal suspect, at least in the eyes of some, as a rationale for advocating the humanities today. Recalling this genealogy provides a welcome illustration of the ambivalence in the humanities between their universal scope—the *studia humanoria* or *humanitatis* were about the human (over against studies concerned with things divine) and therefore of significance for everyone—and their historically exclusive character, necessarily limited to a select group with enough spare time and leisure to afford the commitment required. Advocates of the modern liberal arts would surely take issue, though, with the idea that this history diminishes the humanities' genuinely democratic aspirations. But while this idealist appeal—the insistence that the humanities, in theory, are inclusive and foster democracy—is not without merit, it takes the debate to a very abstract level and claims social and political effects that are exceedingly difficult to measure.[6]

A different approach, suggested by British intellectual historian Stefan Collini, consists in changing the terms of the conversation.[7] Rather than ponder the possible "yield" of the humanities, their social, political and economic benefits, Collini argues that giving an account of the actual activities and practices of research in the humanities disciplines

[3] Guillory 2022, 49.

[4] Reitter and Wellmon 2021, 255–57. For a more outspoken dismissal of this idea see Fish 2003.

[5] Harper 2025; Speri 2026.

[6] For an example of this difficulty, in a slightly different but closely related area, the arts, see the empirical studies seeking to test the effects of engagement with the arts cited in Menninghaus 2011, 262–70.

[7] Collini 2012, 61–85, 2018, 222–30. A similar line is suggested by Fish 2008, 154.

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avoids the defensive stance that is too often conditioned by the assumption of an unsympathetic interlocutor. Rather than resorting to abstract and lofty ideals, it allows for a more realistic picture of what the humanities afford their practitioners. Put in the most basic terms, the humanities are engaged in refining and enhancing our understanding of the arts, artifacts, and texts that make up our cultural traditions. It is a type of activity that involves the perceptiveness and judgment of its practitioners. Its elementary gesture consists in drawing attention to aspects of a given object or phenomenon hitherto overlooked or unavailable within the received conceptual framework. This obviously presupposes familiarity with the existing scholarship, but the perceptiveness and judgment that are indispensable for this activity are above all a matter of training and practice. Students are essentially invited to hone and enhance their perceptiveness and to sharpen their judgment through emulation and practice and to become adept at "the disciplined free play of the mind," to use an apt phrase of Collini's.[8]

All of this is predicated on the premise that understanding and its continual improvement—the "advancement of learning," as Francis Bacon called it—is a desirable and worthwhile goal in and of itself and that it affords its practitioners its very own kind of gratification. In a sense, the proof is in the experience itself and its unquantifiable rewardingness. This will not sway the skeptic, and it is not meant to do so. The point is not to accept the challenge to defend the humanities in light of criteria which, at best, they fulfil only incidentally.

Refusing to engage in an argument in terms imposed from without may go some way in restoring self-confidence, but it does not resolve the predicament, the perennial crisis plaguing the humanities. On Reitter and Wellmon's account, this crisis has been permanent but has reached a new peak. The current institutional outlook—declining enrollments, department closures or mergers, the disestablishment of programs, diminishing career prospects for young scholars, the reactionary wholesale denunciation of the humanities as "cultural marxism"—is alarming indeed.[9] Its reasons are manifold; but for the most part they are outside the purview of the debate. One factor, for instance, is undoubtedly the receding significance in the public eye of the very artifacts, texts, and traditions at the heart of the humanities, notwithstanding the greater inclusiveness they have adopted over the past decades, encompassing popular culture and media.[10] Even the addition of cultural studies to the arsenal of research paradigms in the humanities has not reversed the overall trend. But precisely because the humanities will not remedy a situation not of their making and far beyond their purview, a less despondent stance is necessary and, I believe, possible.

What the humanities do is deceptively humble and straightforward, even though it takes time and effort. This is at odds with a widespread perception of work in the humanities by outsiders, namely its aloofness and disregard for the general public—a disregard and neglect frequently invoked, by the way, as another culprit for the fundamental predicament afflicting the humanities disciplines over the last few decades: their rapidly diminishing returns. Without entering into the details of this debate, between Rita Felski, John Guillory, and others, the apparent disconnect from interested publics appears to me to be the most viable opening for a new lease on life, a kind of reinvigoration, in a lower key to be sure and

[8] Collini 2018, 224.

[9] For a discussion of the politicization of the humanities in the US, real or alleged, see Boghossian et al. 2026. For a similar indictment from eighteen years earlier and far more critical see Fish 2008.

[10] Marx 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275 Published online by Cambridge University Press

most likely in venues outside of academia.[11] The fact that it is very hard to countenance this prospect shows the difficulties of imagining the humanities not in the guise of scholarship.

Scholarship in the humanities is as specialized and rarefied as research in the sciences. For the most part, such scholarship addresses itself to other scholars; it is in dialogue with predecessors, it presupposes and is expected to reflect familiarity with developments in its field. It is generally characteristic of research and scholarship, whether in the sciences or the humanities, that their insights and findings are most often not readily available to the curious outsider. In the case of the humanities, this tends to cause discontent, whereas the results of scientific research are rarely expected to be grasped by the broader public. As regrettable as this discrepancy may be, the expectation should be regarded as a potential for the humanities to tap into. For it turns out that there is after all a far greater deal of interest in developing and enhancing one's appreciation of the arts and letters, to use the old-fashioned term, among those not professionally devoted to them.[12] They constitute multiple and diverse publics that are interested in different areas within the extensive realm covered by the humanities. The humanities, in spite of their name, are not concerned with humanity as such but with a wide range of cultural artifacts and documents that are in one way or another exemplary of human meaning-making, and so it is no wonder that they will attract different constituencies, dispersed and comparatively small.

What form this would take, how such initiatives are organized, how successful they are, and what constitutes success, these are open questions that require creative responses. Among the most prominent examples of new public humanities publications are *The Hinternet Foundation* seeking to chart "A Third Way for the Humanities"; *The Point* magazine, "founded on the suspicion that modern life is worth examing" which it does by engaging with issues of contemporary life from a variety of perspectives, informed by humanistic thinking; and, finally, *The Public Humanities* journal itself, whose most recent issue is dedicated to the very practical question of how to do public humanities and whose very first issue, dubbed "The Manifesto-Issue," showcased numerous instances of what such work can look like.[13] In the United States there are numerous initiatives offering interested members of the public, frequently but not exclusively non-specialists, venues to read and discuss works of literature and philosophy, workshops and seminars often run by academics disenchanted with the university.[14]

For all its promise, the prospect of accommodating the existing public demand raises all sorts of specters. In closing, I want to address two reservations that this moderately optimistic outlook is likely to encounter. The scenario confronts "the scholar" with the very figure from which he sought to distinguish himself, the amateur expert or connaisseur. Not bound to the ethos of scholarly rigor that had presumably done away with affect and affectation, the (amateur-)connaisseur would release the genie of subjectivism from its

[11] Felski 2015; Guillory 2022.

[12] See Collini 2018, 227. Collini also emphasizes that such public interest is not in the humanities *as such* but in individual disciplines and subject areas.

[13] The Hinternet Editorial Board 2026; Wilson 2026; Wilson and Buelitis 2025.

[14] An example is the *Matthew Strother Center of the Examined Life* located in the Catskill Mountains, New York. One could also list various podcasts like Robert Pogue Harrison's *Entitled Opinions*, based at Stanford, or the German online feuilleton and podcast *54books.* A more local, smaller-scale example from my own neighborhood is the *Lesetheke*, the so-called reading counter, organized by colleagues at the University of Halle, a very hands-on initiative by literary studies scholars to talk about literature with members of the public, not in a classroom setting or on a stage, but in face-to-face encounters, that is, one-on-one, in different public venues like youth centers and libraries. Another example are the regular readings and discussions at Literaturhaus Halle organized by students and faculty with the specific goal of presenting what we actually do as students of literature to the public.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bottle. But precisely inasmuch as the public humanities would want to be ecumenical, setting up rules for admission and conduct for what will likely be quite heterogeneous publics would defeat the purpose. As for the specter of "undisciplined" subjectivism, it is a welcome reminder that subjectivity is at the heart of the *studia humanitatis*, the subjectivity, whether in an individual or a collective sense, speaking from the subject matter under discussion but also that of the discussants whose enthusiasm (or reserve) is an important resource for the collective effort to engage with the given materials.[15]

The second reservation concerns the fate of scholarship itself, the kind of scholarship addressed to other scholars, assuming an advanced level of familiarity with the matters at issue, and untroubled by questions of immediate relevance. As I said before, it is virtually impossible to imagine this type of focused work outside the framework and the infrastructure furnished by the research university. Given the overall trends, the number of people doing scholarship in the Humanities is likely to become dramatically smaller than it is today and retreat to a few elite institutions, research centers and scholarly academies. However, it is important to remember that scholarship actually predates the university and has also had a life in other sites all along. The survival of the scholarly, academic humanities will be closely tied, it seems to me, to the success of the public humanities whose prospects actually look quite promising.

More than twenty years ago Stanley Fish recommended that those advocating the humanities aim lower.[16] Rather than brandishing the flag of moral and political improvement, humanists should insist on the intrinsic value of their pursuit. In the book into which he expanded his article, Fish also advised against adopting the language of economics and profitability in order to persuade state legislators, administrators, parents, and other skeptics.[17] My plea is advanced in a similar spirit but under increasingly challenging institutional circumstances. "Aiming lower" is to return the humanities to their primary calling of analysis, interpretation, and discussion, engaging those who are keen and interested. It is a calling that is open to all yet obliges no one. Recognizing this would save us, in turn, from the strange need to convert anyone to its cause.

Robert Buch is Senior Lecturer of Comparative Literature at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg where he also serves as coordinator of the research cluster Aufklärung, Religion, Wissen (Enlightenment, Religion, Knowledge). His research interests include the history of the humanities; critique and common sense; literature and affect. In 2023, he co-edited a special issue of *Phänomenologische Forschungen* on Hans Blumenberg and Husserl. Recent publications: "The Vicissitudes of the Flesh and the Dreamwork of Modernism," in *Angelaki*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2024; "Trial and Crisis. Blumenberg and Husserl on the Genesis and Meaning of Modern Science" in Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel Whistler, eds., *Interrogating Modernity: Debates with Hans Blumenberg*, London: Palgrave, 2020.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: R.B.; Writing - original draft: R.B.

[15] Such enthusiasm is also the precondition for the public voices of the humanities disciplines such as the classicist Mary Beard in the UK, the political scientist Danielle Allen in the US or the philosopher Markus Gabriel in Germany whose significance lies precisely in their ability to speak to general audiences. Rather than frown at the public resonance such academic "stars" can have, frequently tied to their ability to bring to bear academic expertise on "big questions" or topical issues, one should regard such popular appeal as an important asset in the multi-tiered effort to assert the humanities and make them more visible.

[16] Fish 2003.

[17] "Defending the academy in bottom-line terms is a losing proposition" Fish 2008, 165. As sympathetic as I am to many of the arguments Fish develops in his book, his aim is to assert the autonomy of the university and of university research. The case proposed here is in support of spaces for the humanities beyond the academy. It is predicated, moreover, on the idea that humanistic inquiry cannot be translated into nor transmitted through protocols or formulae whereas Fish is strongly committed to scholarly rigor.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conflict of interests. The author declares no competing interests.

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Cite this article: Buch, Robert. 2026. "Pitching the Humanities, in a Lower Key." *Public Humanities,* 2, e168, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10275 Published online by Cambridge University Press