Where Humanities and Social Sciences Meet

What makes us human? What forces – both past and present – shape our values and beliefs? The human experience in all its aspects involves the simultaneous interaction of complicated biological, psychological, historical, philosophical, aesthetic, spiritual, social, and cultural forces. Given the mission of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, a vibrant humanistic presence is essential.

Indeed, of the 2,193 scholars who have been Fellows since our founding, about 20 percent, came from humanities disciplines. In addition, many other Fellows come from traditional social science disciplines where a clear cultural or interpretive turn is in evidence, so that some Fellows from anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology are closely attuned to the humanities. As one of the major international research centers for the humanities, the Center has included in each class a significant number of historians, philosophers, English and comparative literature scholars, classicists, experts in art and music, novelists, and other humanists.

Shining stars
The list of humanists who have been Center Fellows includes many towering figures in their fields. Novelists Wallace Stegner, Arthur Koestler, Bernard Malamud, and Richard Stern have all been Fellows, as have essayists James Alan McPherson and Ved Mehta. The list of philosophers includes such influential thinkers as Carl Gustav Hempel, Sidney Hook, Karl Popper, W. V. O. Quine, and John Rawls. Historians include Ira Berlin, Gordon Craig, Robert Darnton, John Hope Franklin, Eugene Genovese, Donald Kagan, David Kennedy, Thomas Kuhn, Christopher Lasch, David Levering Lewis, James M. McPherson, Carl Schorske, and Gordon Wood. Fellows in English and comparative literature include Donald Hirsch, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Steven Marcus, Edward Said, Elaine Scarry, and Ian Watt.

Noteworthy books
Works written by historians and classicists at the Center have covered historical eras from Classical Greece through medieval Europe, the Enlightenment, and the modern European period. Works by Americanist historians have made significant contributions to our understanding of the colonial and revolutionary periods, the American Civil War, the Reconstruction era, and the twentieth century. Other Fellows have written important works contributing to our understanding of the history of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Far East.
One area of specialization in which Center Fellows have especially excelled is the history and philosophy of science. The pivotal figures in this field, such as Peter Galison, Charles Gillispie, Daniel Kevles, David Malament, Robert Merton, Arnold Thackray, and Harriet Zuckerman, have all been Fellows, and some of the important books they have written appear in our Tyler Collection. Among the titles of which we are most proud is Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, perhaps the most cited book in the humanities and social sciences during the past half-century.

**Influential interactions**

Interactions between humanists and social and behavioral scientists at the Center have had a profound and enduring impact on both. As the gap between the worlds of science and humanities narrows, fresh ideas are incorporated into programs of scholarly research on both sides of the divide. In the process new, deeper understandings of old and familiar phenomena emerge.

Nowhere are these effects more apparent than in the year-end reports in which Fellows are asked to write about the fellowship experience.

A Nobel laureate in biology, Baruch Blumberg (Fellow 1997), devoted his fellowship period to writing a book about the scientific process as it occurs in practice. He described the impact on his thinking of conversations with another Fellow, Saul Morson, professor of comparative literature from Northwestern University; specifically Morson’s notion of “tempics,” or the recollection of events occurring over a time continuum in which, at any point, a variety of alternate possibilities exist. Blumberg explained that Morson’s inspiration about tempics derives from his study of the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, writing, “I was fascinated to learn that these novelists often didn’t know the eventual outcome when they started writing. They wished to keep many possibilities open as the story progressed and not have a set ‘goal’. As a consequence, the stories weren’t ‘tidy’ as they often are in ordinary fiction. That is, something might happen in the first few chapters that had no bearing whatsoever on the final outcome. I find these ideas very exciting, since they bear a similarity to the scientific process.”

Another social scientist, Mayer Zald of the University of Michigan (Fellow 1994), devoted his year to thinking about how to influence sociology to include a more meaningful humanistic presence. Zald wrote: “When you are involved in the kind of thinking about reshaping the discipline that I have been ... one of the issues is how far to push into adjoining fields. Just how much mastery of hermeneutics, of textual analysis, of phenomenological philosophy is necessary? Remember, I am interested in reconfiguring sociology as a science, not dispensing with science. [Humanists] have convinced me that I have to go further than I had wanted to. I can’t just wave my hand at hermeneutics and the philosophy of language. I have to understand it. That won’t be easy.... But I will do it.”

Another Fellow (1962), University of Chicago psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who went on to write one of the most important books about the development of morality of the last fifty years, described how interactions with humanists had influenced his thinking. Kohlberg wrote: “The central interest for my intellectual communication with other Fellows was morality, something I was interested in at a philosophic and sociological level.... I think the Center year was ... a reconfirmation of my sense of the good, the true, and the beautiful. As a graduate student, I’d always been interested in the ‘big’ ideas and problems.... After leaving [graduate
school] my attitudes had become increasingly professionalized and product-oriented.... An atmosphere in
which people I respected talked about the big issues revivified my sense of them, and my determination to
pursue my particular focus on ... the nature of morality ... regardless of how they fit ‘the field’ of psychology
or child psychology.”

These reflections by social scientists attest to the profound influence sustained interactions with humanists
can have on their thinking. By the same token, reports written by humanist scholars are replete with com-
ments describing the impact of social scientists on their work. Houston Baker, a distinguished scholar of
English and comparative literature (Fellow 1978), wrote: “My notion of the behavioral sciences – and, indeed,
of ‘science’ in general – included the following: jargon, lab coats, and infinite boredom. The revised version
of this notion is as follows: without science, without analytical and informative accounts of human behavior,
we have only dreary prospects for the future.” He went on: “It is hard for me to believe I actually wrote that
statement – and that I am sincere. The finest aspect of my year at the Center has been the well-motivated
alteration of an intellectual point of view... I became intensely aware of the enormous richness and potential
of the social sciences, a range of disciplines about which I have previously been faintly scornful and almost
totally ignorant.”

Another humanist, John Hope Franklin (Fellow 1974), one of the leading American historians of the nine-
teenth and twentieth centuries, wrote: “This has been one of the best years of my life. It has brought me into
close contact with a number of dedicated scholars who have been valuable to me and my work. Their value
was not because they had intimate knowledge of my own field but precisely because their limited knowledge
of what I was doing, coupled with their interest in it and their searching questions, made it possible for me to
look at my own problems from angles and points of view that would otherwise have never occurred to me.”

David Nirenberg (Fellow 2001), a historian of medieval Spain, wrote: “The astonishing thing about the
Center is that it brings together a number of highly intelligent people with a thirst for intellectual communica-
tion and throws them into a world without a common language.... The making of new intellectual friendships
in such a context requires learning to speak anew, this time without many of the familiar short-hands our
disciplines have developed to protect us from having to dwell upon some of the most basic assumptions of
our practice. The need, or rather the hunger, to explain to others just what it is I am thinking, and to be able
to comprehend their thoughts and work as well, forced me ... to strip away years of accreted professional
varnish.... In the process, I came to see many aspects of my project as if for the first time.”

This theme was echoed in the report submitted by the Renaissance and medieval scholar Richard Goldthwaite
(Fellow 1989): “The Center ... offered an intellectual life that shook deep intellectual foundations — and that
is what the scholarly life ought to be about.”

The sentiments expressed in these excerpts appear time and time again by scholars belonging to all camps and
in all of the disciplines represented by past and current Fellows. The precision of controlled observation and
measurement that characterizes good social science research, together with an appreciation for the phenom-
ena learned through history, as well as the penetrating insights humanistic scholarship makes possible, in the
end yields a depth and breadth of knowledge about human existence that cannot be acquired in any other
way.
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