

“Wicked Problems”: Humanities Advocacy’s Need for History of Humanities

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ABSTRACT

Advocates for the humanities have ongoing need of good work in the history of humanities as they canvas evidence of how the field has, in the past, sought to describe its contributions to knowledge and articulate the importance of its distinctive concentration on the objects, media, and value of culture. Apprehending better which arguments have been persuasive contextually and which have fared less well can help sharpen defenses for the future and avoid errors of description. This forum contribution considers the need to take a wide view of which disciplinary histories will be relevant—reinforcing the introduction’s observation that the history of the humanities continues to develop in close connection with the history of knowledge, construed more generally. In recent years, numerous advocates have advanced claims that humanities disciplines are well equipped (even uniquely equipped) to handle “wicked problems”—intractably complex problems germane to the future flourishing of our societies and the planet. Returning to the origins of the wicked problems concept within late 1960s urban planning, and subsequent disputes within the social sciences over its validity, I argue that deploying it persuasively on behalf of the humanities will require careful attention to a history that has left it with uneven traction in other disciplines.

I approach this forum on future directions for the history of the humanities with a special interest in what advocates for the humanities may need from the field’s historians. Amid cultural, political, and fiscal pressures on humanities higher education and research that are in many national contexts severe, sometimes long-standing, and look set to deepen, it is unsurprising that the burden of justification weighs heavily on any humanist pressed to articulate the field’s contribution to solving the most urgent problems facing society and the planet: global warming, sustainable housing, food security, resurgent nationalisms. By way of a test case for what advocacy stands to gain from a stronger

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understanding of the history behind the concepts on which it relies, I look here at “wicked problems”—a relatively recent addition to the armory of humanities defense, evidently motivated by the need for stronger articulations of what humanities disciplines can offer public policymaking.

First mooted by the German-American urban planning theorist Horst Rittel in a seminar at the University of California, Berkeley architecture department in 1967, then famously defined by Rittel and Melvin Webber in their joint 1973 paper “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” “wicked problems” was a rhetorical term of art, designating problems in social policy for which any attempt at a “scientific” resolution is bound to fail. According to their oft-quoted summary definition, “wicked problems” are policy problems of an order of complexity that prevents their “definitive” description. Given (the authors argued) that, in a pluralistic society, there is “nothing like the indisputable public good,” policy responses to social problems “cannot be meaningfully correct or false”—nor even “optimal,” except with “severe qualifications.” “Even worse,” there are “no ‘solutions’ in the sense of definitive and objective answers.”¹

A striking number of recent advocates for the humanities have of late turned to “wicked problems” as a concept that could—or should—work well for humanities disciplines as they look to articulate their contribution to better social planning, perhaps unaware that the term has long been contentious and has grown somewhat tired within those social science disciplines that adopted it enthusiastically early on. Understanding why it lost momentum elsewhere and what accommodations may be needed to acknowledge well-founded criticisms from other fields is, I want to argue, crucial to determining whether it can help and not hinder efforts at securing and reinvigorating the humanities’ social legitimacy going forward.

In extending the remit of this forum beyond the “history of the humanities” proper to consider historical debates within the social sciences that have a bearing on humanities practices and self-descriptions today, I am consciously stretching the “integrative” approach to the field that predominates in this journal. The line of inquiry pursued here is in line with the forum editors’ observation that the history of the humanities has developed as an intellectual and institutional formation in close connection with the history of knowledge and that, going forward, the two endeavors stand to profit from deeper reflection on how they interact. One way of framing this case study, then, is

1. Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” 155. I omit for reasons of space the ten “distinguishing properties” ascribed to wicked problems. More generic adaptations of Rittel and Webber’s definition also circulate widely: for instance, claims that wicked problems typically ramify, the process of addressing one disclosing others, or generating catch-22 scenarios where a solution to one problem gives rise to another. See, e.g., Schiefeloe, “The Corona Virus.”

as a politically topical instance of how present-day “epistemological turmoil” has generated a “new conceptualization” (see the introduction) that is, on closer scrutiny, rather newer for humanities disciplines than for some others—a disjunct with consequences for our ability to be persuasive in joined conversation.

In a systematic review, published in 2021, of the wicked problems literature, from Rittel’s first coinage to around 2019, Johanna Lönngren and Katrien van Poeck observe an exponential rise in visibility of the concept since 1973, with a rapid acceleration in uptake from, roughly, 2002. Their data are generated from Scopus, the largest database available to capture discursive tendencies in “the research community.”² Lönngren and van Poeck found their Scopus search disappointingly unfruitful for examples from the “humanities and literature and arts,” but the term is out there, increasingly doing service in two connected locations: at the interface between humanities and policy planning for “grand challenges,” and in the self-promotional literature of liberal arts institutions and humanities research centers. Two indicative examples from the United States are:

- Stony Brook University, promoting its environmental humanities program: Climate change, like problems in education policy and public health, is a wicked problem. It avoids straightforward articulation and is impossible to solve in a way that is simple or final. . . . As scholars who work in the environmental humanities our goal is to [understand] the problems of climate change while also critiquing the language and methods we use to articulate those problems.³
- Stanford University, fronting its new Cultivating Humanities grants fund: Collaborative teams [will tackle] issues of public concern including political representation of women, changing narratives on sexual violence and emotional and behavioral responses to climate change. . . . “We’re calling them wicked problems.”⁴

Two more examples are from the United Kingdom:

- A British Academy Cities and Infrastructure Review Report: There were active efforts . . . to build interdisciplinary synergies . . . in order to address wicked problems. The Academy’s expectation that the humanities and

2. Lönngren and van Poeck, “Wicked Problems,” graphs at 482–84. The limits of the database—in geographic as well as content coverage—are increasingly well known and are to an extent acknowledged in the study. See, e.g., Tennant, “Web of Science and Scopus.”

3. Environmental Working Group, “What’s a Wicked Problem?”

4. Adams and Feder, “Changing Human Experience.”

social sciences would take the lead . . . [was] appreciated as a positive differentiation from many other “interdisciplinary” programmes . . . particularly important for GCRF [UK Global Challenges Research Fund] initiatives.⁵

- A 2019 website report on a “Futures Thinking” workshop at the Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities titled “Down the Rabbit Hole: How Can Creativity Solve Wicked Problems?”⁶

Examples such as these, in which reference to wicked problems helps make the case for policy-oriented value in humanities research, entail a strikingly belated importation of terminology from the social sciences, a remarkable case of discursive “slow burn.” Broad similarities between the original context in which the term arose and the contexts of public justification spurring its uptake now suggest reasons why it appears germane to humanists. Hostile to description, hostile to solution, and above all hostile to professional “social-scientific” expertise, wicked problems took root at a historical moment of dispute (arguably a constitutive, ongoing dispute) within social science whereby a humanistic wing of the subject invited the more policy-facing professional arm of the discipline(s) to check ambition, recognize boundaries, and accept involvement in a social situation where a plurality of experiences, interests, capacities will always limit what well-planned social intervention can achieve. In context this was, first and foremost, a rhetorical move from within academia to complicate critical vocabularies at a time of expanding ambitions in government policymaking—countering the authority of social theory in the planning sphere and admitting more in the way of irreducible cultural “messiness.” The primary, interlinked targets were government agencies and the professional social science associations most closely involved with them (the American Academy of Arts and Sciences was among those explicitly named).⁷ An additional context suggests itself to anyone interested in the history of philosophy—though not registered in the paper. The more fleshed-out version of the wicked problems paper saw the light two years after John Rawls’s enormously influential formulation of the “veil of ignorance” principle in his *Theory of Justice* (1971).⁸ Wicked problems would seem to mark the point at which the theorist of social planning turns to the philosopher, as much as the social scientist, and

5. Meagher, with Kettle, *British Academy Cities and Infrastructure Review Report*. Lönngren and van Poeck observe (“Wicked Problems,” 486) that “wicked problems” literature seems to emanate especially from North America, Europe (including the United Kingdom), and Australia. I am not aware of any comprehensive review of the term’s traction in translation, though it is current in several languages, including French (*méchants problèmes*) and German (*böse Probleme*).

6. Holloway, “Down the Rabbit Hole.”

7. Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” 157.

8. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 12.

pronounces a limit case for the social application of disinterestedness. Where Rawls advises us to put justice to the theoretical test of not knowing what position we will occupy in a given society (young? old? able? disabled? Black? White? rich? poor? anywhere in between such polarized options?), Rittel and Webber tell us that in practice we (academics, policymakers, and policy implementers alike) are inextricable from the social thing—the untidy intermeshing of interests, ideology, conflicting priorities, contending goods.

The attraction of wicked problems for humanities advocates today addressing the requirements of policymakers is, presumptively, similar in kind, arising as it does in the expansive border territory between humanities and the sciences and social sciences. Rhetorical rather than heuristic, the term makes a stylistic show (once again) of the difficult hinge point where a move might or might not be possible from recognizing cultural complexity to real-world action, from theoretical debate to policy decision. The concept it introduces to humanities advocacy seems the more likely to find a warm reception within our own disciplines insofar as it confirms a persistent (not unchallenged) internal prejudice to the effect that our fields of study have a distinctive orientation toward irreducible cultural complexity. This is the attribution of distinction ventured, for example, by the sociologist Jerome Kagan when he draws a very broad cultural comparison between the sciences, social sciences, and humanities to the effect that the humanities have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than other divisions of the university. Moreover, they “remind society of its contradictions, articulate salient emotional states, detect changing cultural premises, confront their culture’s deepest moral dilemmas, and document the unpredictable events that punctuate a life or a historical era.”⁹ I discuss the limits of that widely espoused characterization in *The Value of the Humanities* (both the narrowing of the range of knowledge practices and values encompassed by the “humanities,” some of which are strongly normative, and the failure to credit other fields with the capacity for complexity and critical self-reflection).¹⁰ In the context of assessing the plausibility, going forward, of this new-old addition to our vocabulary, the more immediately salient concern is with what we stand to learn from recognizing a history of dispute, largely confined to the social sciences as yet, over the conceptual limits of wicked problems.

The realist but not obviously pragmatic thrust of Rittel and Webber’s paper as it draws limits on what “science” can achieve looms large among the reasons why critics from political science have expressed exasperation with the term’s traction not only in policy analysis and planning literature but (since 2002) across an extraordinary range

9. Kagan, *Three Cultures*, 231.

10. Small, *Value of the Humanities*, 51–52.

of fields—education, economics, computer science, health care, and, especially of late, sustainability literature and environmental humanities. Chief among the reasons Nick Turnbull and Robert Hoppe give for checking enthusiasm is the sound observation that there is “no coherent . . . basis” to Rittel and Webber’s underpinning distinction between “wicked” and “tame” problems¹¹—tameness being a supposed feature of problems in the natural sciences, whereas the social sciences deal with “inherently wicked” human and cultural complexities. Science problems are not value free, Turnbull and Hoppe remind us: the social contexts of their identification, analysis, attempted solution are, if not determining of their meaning, strongly contributory. If there is a hint of exasperation in the tone, it is understandable, given how fundamental the point is to history and sociology of science. As they see it, wicked problems has a viable role in social science conversations only if the term is understood to describe not an ontological condition of “wickedness,” specific to some problems not others, but a means of factoring in “the inherent political quality of the policy process.” In short, the term’s function was and should remain rhetorical, and political science may have better words already in its repertoire. They prefer Michel Meyer’s term “problematicity”: a graded factoring in of the higher and lower orders of complexity confronting actors in policy work with more or less distance between their world view, values, institutional lines of authority, political interests, and available processes.¹²

It is legitimate criticism. But how salient is it to fault so plainly rhetorical an intervention on the basis that it is, discernibly, rhetorical and lacking something in analytic cogency? In the wider context of Horst Rittel’s career, it seems odd, to put it mildly, that these particular authors should be faulted for ignoring the social dimensions of science. Much of Rittel’s wider (less well remembered) work was directed at the interface between “hard sciences” and “design” in the broadest sense: “the nature of their problems, the kinds and structures of the knowledge they use, the formation of judgement, their logics of procedure.”¹³ These are domains of inquiry often associated principally with philosophy, history of science, history of knowledge—though they are not theirs alone. His training and interests included chemistry, mathematics, computer science, information science, but also architecture and law—subjects whose university affiliation with the social sciences rather than with the humanities tends to be moot, locally driven by institutional considerations, including income streams, and not purely a reflection of intellectual orientation. At the time of his death in 1990, Rittel was working on “a general theory of technology,” asking how we might trace the consequences of applied

11. Turnbull and Hoppe, “Problematizing ‘Wickedness,’” 316.

12. *Ibid.*, 322.

13. Churchman et al., “In Memoriam,” 89.

technology, and combine technologies, without "generating unforeseen and undesirable side- and after-effects." Trenchantly skeptical of claims that artificial intelligence would soon exceed human intellectual capabilities, he had his eye always on intellectual and real-world untidiness. Indicatively, "he wanted to find what happens when residues get through together as the effluents of sewage plants." "Mishmashes" was his preferred descriptor: "vulgar" but conceptually "important."¹⁴

Social and policy science have of late often struggled, it would seem, to know what to do with the wicked problems paper's insistence on policy intervention's vulgar residues. Reviewing the literature from the social sciences and sciences, Lönngren and van Poeck agree that the concept lacks clarity, but conclude that it has value in two respects: as a "sensitizing/creative concept" (a way of keeping the need for conflictual, decentralized, and multiperspectival approaches to the fore in the exploratory stages of new research programs), and as a "critical/emancipatory tool."¹⁵ Just as Rittel and Webber used wicked problems to make a "political intervention" against reductionism in policy planning, so it continues to be employed at the boundaries of disciplines where reductionism appears a risk. In disciplines that already possess a high degree of internal alertness to that risk (e.g., social planning), the need for the concept (and thus tolerance of its appearance) has waned, Lönngren and van Poeck suggest; in those where instrumental problem solving is an urgent priority ("such as engineering education for sustainable development"¹⁶), the term finds more traction.

This seems a plausible explanation of the highly variable appetite for talk of wicked problems across social science and science disciplines. A near analogue then seems to apply with early uptake in the humanities, where the term has, thus far, appealed especially to advocates working within and speaking on behalf of new institutional formations looking to establish productive, instrumentally driven collaborations with colleagues across the university: environmental humanities, digital humanities, urban futures thinking, work to reduce gender-based violence. I have yet to find a single instance of its deployment within more centralized disciplines—literary studies, cultural studies, art history, social history, intellectual history—and am, indeed, struck by how many humanities scholars have no prior familiarity with it.

What should we then make, critically, of the appearance of wicked problems within advocacy for policy-oriented humanities research—a discursive development that has been happening (to the best of my knowledge) in the absence of any engagement as yet with its history and, therefore, without sensitivity to its uneven purchase across the

14. Ibid., 90–91.

15. Lönngren and van Poeck, "Wicked Problems," 492.

16. Ibid., 493.

university? Are these advocates for the potential contribution of humanities disciplines in the policy sphere offering anything other than late imitations of a rhetorical gambit that has, for some other academic fields, already come to seem dated and thin? That is the danger.

The positive case for wicked problems is that it can, and indeed already does, make an entrance at that juncture where humanists look to make social interventions for the public good in a highly complex, highly contested field of political operation and feel the tight constraints of disciplinary perspective and training as they do so. Until now, the rhetorical appeal of wicked problems seems to have been largely intuitive. What the phrase can helpfully do if we are attuned to its history and bring its contested value in other fields to the debate is, I suggest, lock into a deliberately simplified vocabulary of rightly constrained ambition, but ambition nonetheless. Stony Brook, for example, seems to me to couch its claims for the humanities appropriately when it invokes wicked problems in order to outline a humanistic contribution to tackling climate change that starts (negatively) by seizing the difficulty of straightforward articulation, the “impossibility” of “simple or final” solution, then proceeds (positively) to the work of scrutinizing existing patterns of linguistic expression and methodological (one could add, cultural) preference that may be limiting success. The British Academy report looks weaker when it moves too speedily from wicked problems to “solutions,” with no granular specificity on what the humanities’ contribution will be.

We have other much more refined vocabularies available in our current philosophical literature for the irreducible complexity of the cultural field (the phrase tends to bring to mind Bourdieu; but, with an eye to the political ramifications, Bonnie Honig’s “agonistic conception of democracy” might be equally to the point, or even Chantal Mouffe’s “domesticat[ed] hostility”¹⁷). Isaiah Berlin, a colleague suggested to me,¹⁸ would have called “wicked problems” quite simply “problems.” That is appropriately deflating, but “wicked problems” has the strengths as well as the shortcomings of rhetorical inflation. It does not wear its abstraction on its sleeve, as it were: it is abstract, but it is also demotic, familiar, more than a little thespian. If it falls some way short of the distinction of philosophy, it nevertheless provides a useful shorthand for recognizing that there is no world of practice free of judgments, values, ideas, and thus conflicts. A history of the humanities that keeps its boundaries wide can make that shorthand legible. Anyone taking up the challenge of advocating for our fields’ contribution to problems of general public concern stands to benefit from being equipped, then, not just to defend our fields but to bring them into conversation with potential

17. Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 101.

18. Seamus Perry—whom I thank.

collaborators in other fields, employing a shared vocabulary in ways that can be plausible to all.

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